

WILLIAM O'FARRELL'S - "One Hour Late"

K MANHUNT

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"ONE HOUR LATE"

that's me. I got nothin' and nobody." She was just Thelma out for kicks and she didn't care which man she was with.

The man held Thelma's shoulder with an ice like grip. She yelled but the only sound that got out was a sort of roaring bubble.

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CONTENTS

FULL LENGTH NOVEL

- ONE HOUR LATE *by William O'Farrell* 76

NOVELETTE

- THE DOUBLE TAKE *by Edward Wellen* 26

SHORT STORIES

- THE RUNAWAY *by Bryce Walton* 1
 ROAD TO SAMARRA *by Jane Roth* 11
 FAIR PLAY *by Jack Ritchie* 20
 MR. BIG NOSE *by Martin Suto* 46
 TIE SCORE *by Carroll Mayers* 61
 AWAKE TO FEAR *by Robert Camp* 65

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THE RUNAWAY

Mosby finally escaped the deadly boredom of his urban life and he managed to take with him over a quarter of a million dollars. Now wounded, buried beneath piles of filthy rags, trying to escape from the cold and detection, he pondered if it had all been worth it.

BY
BRYCE WALTON

THE OLD lady had bright eyes that studied him as she backed out into the dim hallway. He had worn old clothes hoping to be inconspicuous, but Mrs. Eastman seemed to be doubtful about his belonging in the tenement slums.

That was going to be the trouble now for some time, figuring out where he belonged. Only he didn't want it to be anybody else's business.

"You got nothing here but privacy," the old lady said.

"That's fine," he said, wondering if she meant anything special.

"Heat's off at nine at night, comes on at seven in the morning."

"All right, thanks."



"Bathroom's down the hall. If there ain't enough hot water, don't scream about it. Just move out."

He grinned tightly. "I'll do that, Mrs. Eastman."

"I won't be around here much longer anyway and I don't intend to be bothered."

"I won't be any bother."

She went away down the hall. He shut the door, locked it, and opened the briefcase. He counted the two hundred and fifty-three thousand dollars he had taken with him two days ago when he had resigned without notice from the assistant vice-presidency of the Lakeville Trust Company. When he replaced the money in the briefcase and put it away in the closet, several large cockroaches skittered out and went under the bed.

He had planned the job a long time, thought about it for years; now he sat down on the creaky bed and opened the fifth of Lord Calvert that had been a birthday present from his secretary at the bank. It didn't help his nerves much.

What he needed was a handful of knockout pills so he could forget Lakeville, his hometown, and the split-level ranch-type house, the Country Club, his old lodge buddies, his PTA-loving wife, and everything else that, for some reason, had made Lakeville, U.S.A., nauseating and finally unbearable.

Lakeville had been bad. But this sudden unfamiliarity, no friends, no security, no schedules, nothing the

same, a different world. This would be pretty bad too for a while. Take some getting used to. Meanwhile, he couldn't afford to make even a small mistake.

He had shaven off his mustache, gotten himself a crewcut, and wore different clothes. He was 2500 miles from Lakeville and had carefully worked out a sure-fire plan to get a lot farther away than that. It would be several weeks yet before he could manage it.

He took the picture of his 12-year-old daughter, Joan, from his wallet and looked at it. A sudden sense of irretrievable loss affected him. She stood there smiling proudly in her new blue Christmas coat, holding out a mechanical bear, and in her crude but dignified scrawl it said, "All my love to Daddy."

He had to erase it all. He crumbled the picture, then burned it in an ashtray. His wife didn't matter. None of them did. None of them but Joan. She would never understand, that was the trouble.

He drifted into troubled sleep while the freezing wind tore at the window. He dreamed he was crossing a bridge above muddy turbulent water, and he awoke with a suppressed cry as the bridge started to fall apart under him.

He lay sweating, still fully clothed, in an icy room and for one frightening moment he had no idea where he was. And then he felt the slight trembling in the floor and

walls. It reminded him of one of those earthquakes in Los Angeles that you never believe until it's over because it's incredible that the world itself might crack open like a bad egg.

He looked out the window. In the charcoal gray morning, an erratic wind was puffing bits of dry frozen snow down the almost deserted street. Mrs. Eastman's rooming house faced toward a huge slum-clearance project that he hadn't noticed in the darkness of the preceding night. A square block directly across the street had been cleared, and trucks, bulldozers, cranes moved about on it. On three sides of the lot were rows of vacated tenements, windows and doors boarded over, and some of them partly demolished.

A crane far to the right moved, the cable swung a huge ball of lead weighing tons crashing into a brick wall, all that remained of a ten-story tenement. The entire wall collapsed. A sullen explosion rose in a yellowish cloud.

He turned away from the window quickly. He wiped at his sweating face. Something about those buildings crumbling was an unpleasant reminder of his own insistent feelings of being transitory, somehow unsubstantial. He had to lick those feelings. He wouldn't move. He would stay. The hell with things like this.

Three days later he felt no better. Readjustment wasn't going to be

easy. He seemed to miss the things he had once hated, but he also felt that his readjustment was only a matter of time. When he stepped off that plane at Guatemala City, he would be ready to start all over, and enjoy his freedom and whatever he was going to be.

Alone at nights in his room, he drank a little. But only a little because when drunk he had a tendency to get belligerent, and he didn't want any trouble with the police. If he attracted any attention whatever from the police, he was done for.

Once he read the newspapers. An explosion had occurred in small tradition-bound little Lakeville. No one seemed to have believed Allan Lewis would have done such a thing. His wife was hysterical and was expected to have a nervous breakdown. Mr. Allan Lewis was just a great guy. Everyone knew Allan Lewis was a great guy. Allan was born and raised right here in Lakeville. He was absolutely honest, trustworthy and loyal.

That was just the trouble, he thought. The trouble they overlooked. Being born and raised in Lakeville was too much to ask from any man. You live forty years in Lakeville and you either get out finally or go on living there, walking around dead from the neck up.

Just the same, the police wouldn't be accepting any such character references from the residents of Lakeville. They knew Allan Lewis had

taken the money. But they had no idea where he was.

He stayed mostly to himself, and he took long walks. The only two people he spoke to at all were Mrs. Eastman occasionally, and a pale thin little girl named Donna who lived next door.

Donna was thin and hollow-eyed and she never said anything. She played with a dirty rag doll, and she smiled shyly at him the third time he walked past there in the evening and gave her candy. When she reached for the candy, she kept one shoulder raised as though she expected to be hit.

"I'm not one to gossip. I mind my own business," Mrs. Eastman said. "And I have nothing to say about poor little Donna's mother except that her husband ran out on her five years ago—if he *was* her husband. And she's a lush and most of the time doesn't come home until three in the morning. That poor little girl doesn't have any mother. But I'm not blaming the mother so much. That man who ran away and left them—he ought to be hunted down and shot like a criminal."

After that, he thought about Donna a great deal. He would stop and talk to her when he saw her out front playing in the cold. There was something frightening in her being so oblivious of the cold. She didn't seem to feel it or care about it. Her coat was ragged, and her mittens were torn, and sometimes her lips were blue with cold. She

was only concerned about keeping her rag doll warm.

He finally realized that she was waiting. She was always waiting for her mother to come home. She would go inside once in a while and when Lewis walked by, he saw her standing just inside, her face pressed against the door glass.

He stopped and talked with her every morning, and made her go inside to wait. He got to bringing her sandwiches from a restaurant down the street, and cartons of milk.

Once Donna's mother came home after dark, wearing a moth-looking fur coat. She jerked Donna inside and sullenly said to Lewis, "What the hell are you angling for, Buster?"

The rest of the time, Lewis would sit with uncomfortable fascination in his room and watch the dead tenements falling down like giant dirty doll houses. There were five square blocks of tenements to come down, but he didn't intend to see the end of the project.

Sometimes he thought of the money in the suitcase in the closet and what it would mean to Donna who was always waiting for what would never come; for Donna and all the others like her everywhere. It was something he had never thought about before.

A week later he walked past there and she was standing inside, and when she saw him she came out and stood in the shadows in the

cold. He heard her sobbing, and he went over to her and sat down on the steps and sat the child on his knees.

When he asked her what was the matter, she showed him the rag doll. Its arm had torn off.

"Won't your mother fix it? All that has to be done is to sew it back on."

Donna shook her head and tears ran down her face.

"I'll take it with me, and fit it for you," he said. When he took it, she almost smiled. She trusted him to take it.

"Are you my daddy?" she whispered.

He pressed her face against his chest, then he took the rag doll and went down the street to a cut-rate clothing store and bought a needle and thread. He came back to Mrs. Eastman's apartment, and didn't see Donna out in front nor through the glass of the front door. As he walked up the stairs with the rag doll hanging from his hand, he saw Mrs. Eastman look up at him from the doorway of her first-floor apartment.

He put the rag doll with its detached arm on a chair and sat down on the bed. After listening to the wind tearing at the loose window frame for a while he dragged the bottle off the bureau and started drinking.

It was noon the next day before he could get himself out onto the street and to a restaurant. He

walked for several hours, and when he came back he looked for Donna, but she wasn't out in front, nor in the hall looking through the front door.

It reminded him of the doll. He went back up to his room and decided to try sewing the arm back on the doll. He was sitting by the window trying to thread the needle when he heard the car outside. Looking out, he saw a red-lighted squad car drive up and park in front of Mrs. Eastman's apartment building.

He stood up quickly and the rag doll fell to the floor. A uniformed policeman and a man in a gray overcoat got out of the car and went up the steps.

They could be here for any number of reasons, he thought. He glanced at the closet, then went to the hall door and opening it slowly, he stepped out into the hall.

"Yeah, they just found her," a man's voice was saying. "Over in one of those empty tenements. Dead since last night some time."

"I knew it, I knew it would happen," Mrs. Eastman said.

"Damned woman, didn't even come home last night. Comes home drunk today. Didn't even know the kid was missing. Where's this guy's room, this Mr. Mosby?"

"Mr. Mosby, Mr. Mosby," Mrs. Eastman said, loudly.

"Mr. Tom Mosby, that's right. We understand he's been playing Santa Claus."

"Mr. Mosby. Yes, yes, that's the one, he's the one. I knew there was something about that man all along. I knew it."

"Where's his room, Mrs. Eastman?"

"Second floor. Room 3. I might have known it. I did know it all along. Making up to that poor little girl all the time, and do you know something else. Just last night, late last night, I saw him bringing something in here. That doll, that poor little girl's doll."

He had his topcoat on and was dragging the suitcase out of the closet. As he went back out into the hall, he heard their footsteps on the stairs.

He ran to the rear of the hall and was raising the window when he heard the dull flat command to halt or they would fire. The command didn't sound real, or even human. It reminded him vaguely of a recording, or a voice coming from a radio.

He was trying to get through the window. A puff of dry snow hit his face, and he felt the icy blast of wind. When he heard the shots, he knew how unreal it had been, all of it, how murky and without any reason he could understand. It became even murkier, like a nightmare, as a terrific blow hit him, seemed to knock him through the window and he dropped to the concrete of the alley and felt the agony grind up through his bones into his head. He rolled, got up and

kept on running. Sirens screamed. As he limped into the shadowed street, he saw the red light blinking as the prowler car came toward him. He swerved to the left, ran across the street, then along the vacant lot of crushed bricks past the bulldozer and headed for the street of dead tenements.

He fell on the sandstone steps, then dragged himself to his feet. His pants leg was sticky. Blood squished in his shoe. I've been shot, I'm shot sure as hell, I'm shot in the leg.

He realized without feeling anything about it now that he had left the suitcase back there in the hall.

He ran on into the shadows of dead tenements, to the end of the block, to the left down a deserted street littered with rubble, rusted tin cans, broken bottles, broken bricks, past a rising black wall full of empty holes, and down past empty lots of rubble surrounded by rows of dead building fronts, blank-faced, boarded up and all empty, all dead. No streetlights shone here. All gas and water mains had been disconnected long ago. Only the moonlight shone on him as he ran.

At the top of sandstone steps, a loose door flapped in the wind. He heard muted yells somewhere beyond this row of buildings. They might know in what direction he had run, but it would take a long time to make a thorough search of five square blocks of deserted tenements.

He looked up at the brickwork muddy with grime, over the broken windows and the glass hanging in shards from window frames.

He went inside. The interior had a rank smell. Rubble filled the first floor hall. He wanted to get out of the icy draft and do what he could for his leg, stop the bleeding. Half way up to the first floor landing the entire stair structure canted sickeningly. The rail ripped. He almost fell to the floor below. Rotten boards crumbled. Dust exploded from cracks.

He hugged the wall, shivering as he moved along the second floor hallway. The floor sagged. He found a room smelling of stale warmth and filth. He shut the door. His hand jerked as he thumbed flame into his lighter.

He almost gagged. Dust and stench and filth so awful it made nothing of the dust. In the corner was a kind of nest he knew someone was still using, a dirty lumpy matted pile of torn mattress, felt, excelsior, shredded newspapers and rags.

He sat in the rags. There was an orange crate someone had been using for shelves. Two cans of beans. Some tinned heat and several empty wine bottles. It was a filthy hole, but he had to get warm. Also he could bleed to death, and he could also freeze to death. He couldn't build a fire because the smoke would be seen.

He lit a tin of canned heat and

warmed his hands over the blue flame.

He burrowed into the rags and after making a tourniquet out of his handkerchief and twisting it above the leg wound, he lay there trying to get warm. The icy wind threatened to tear out the walls and he could hear it whining and howling through all those buildings full of empty holes.

He closed his eyes. For a moment he thought of Donna and the anonymous person who had taken her into these tenements and killed her. It was too horrible to think about. If he talked to the cops maybe he could convince them that he hadn't done it, but the point was that they had found the money and that he had to get away.

They had found the money. The money part of it was all over now and done with before it had really started. The money part of it didn't seem to mean anything, and he was more concerned with why this should be than at the loss of the money. Maybe the damn money had never meant anything.

He wondered if he had any chance now of getting away, and if he did get away, how long he could continue living as someone else other than whoever he had been all of his life. He was afraid to think about it. If the money had meant anything at all, it had meant a chance for him to build up some other personality, another way of life. Now he had neither. He wasn't

Allan Lewis. He wasn't Tom Mosby. He was very nearly nobody at all.

Still he tried to think of getting away from the slum clearance project. Beyond this building somewhere was the river. And he remembered that between the project and the river were the freight yards. That might be his only chance. A freight train out of town.

Listening carefully now he could hear the far-off sounds of a switch engine and the banging and clanging of cars making up in the yards. . . .

He woke up with a shivering start of fear. A charcoal gray light shone with a stark feelingless solidarity like dirty ice over his chest.

He groaned as he sat up and he began to swear with a kind of fearful rage. For a week he had found it almost impossible to sleep. Now when he had needed to stay awake, had to get out of this trap, he had drifted off into an unbroken and dreamless sleep. It was as though some pressure had been taken off him and he had been able to rest.

Anyway, it was now daylight, and whatever his chance for escape, it had been considerably reduced.

He rubbed at his burning eyes and then lunged up out of the dirty felt and excelsior. Pain burned up from his leg and seemed to explode through his head in dizzy waves. He leaned against the wall. God, why did I sleep? As though it was good to have gotten rid of the

money and as though just a little warmth and comfort was all he really needed or wanted after all.

He put the cans of beans and the other can of heat into his top-coat pockets and went down the canting stairs and slipped out the door into the street. He would get close, maybe even within sight of the freightyards, and he would make a break for it.

He entered another building a block away, worked his way through a thick soggy mass of junk to the rear and looked out through a partly boarded window onto a lot about a half a block long.

The lot was a no-man's land of shattered foundations, piles of broken brick and concrete. It resembled a bombed-out war ruin. On either side were partly demolished tenements. On the other side of the lot was a long brick wall with hills of rubble going up to the jagged top. On the other side of that wall was the river and the freight yards.

He could hear machinery grinding, the yells of men. Dust billowed up above the wall, and to the right he heard a long sullen explosion and a cloud of yellow sulphuric dust lifted heavily on the icy air.

The building around him shivered. A trickle of plaster ran down into his hair, over his shoulders. He picked out a course for himself across the lot and tensed to make the run.

Just then a half a dozen kids

ran onto the lot, yelling and laughing. Three of them dodged behind a pile of brick. The others ducked down into a shell hole. That was what one of the kids said it was. A shell hole. Bang-bang noises went up shrilly as the kids started throwing rocks at one another.

"I got you first, you're dead."

"No you didn't. I got you first."

"You didn't. You're dead. Fall down dead."

"You're dead."

One of the kids threw up his arms and stumbled a few steps, making exaggerated motions of mimic death throes, then he came miraculously alive again and ran behind a chunk of concrete.

Lewis crouched just below the line of the boarded window and watched the kids play. For some reason, in spite of the tenseness and fear, he thought of the money he had taken, that by this time had been identified and was probably even on its way back to the Lakeville Trust. Not a cent of it was missing. When it was returned to Lakeville, the bank would be as perfectly solvent as it had always been, and would always be. And even if the money were never returned, the Bank would be the same, insured and safe. In a way, it would really be as though nothing had ever happened.

Only for him, he thought, was there any real difference.

Taking that money was just a game of some kind, a game he

should have gotten out of his system when he was a kid maybe, back when it wasn't for keeps, and you could jump up and make things the way they had been before. The money, you took it, and it went back again, it didn't matter, didn't change anything. But now the game was different, and in this game you stayed dead.

Just like Donna had stayed dead even though she was a kid and had never had a chance to grow up. Sometimes you never got the chance, he thought.

He shivered. His hands were turning blue. His leg was stiff and swollen.

A tremendous roar came from the wall. Mortar fell. The building he was in trembled, and a crack ran down the plaster under his hand. Then he saw the rats coming out into the vacant lot, two and three at a time, disorganized and crazed with fear. They came out of a building that was falling down, leaping and twisting in panic, and trying to hide in piles of brick and concrete and the kids yelled and chased them with clubs.

He sank down and put his freezing hand over his face. His hand felt numb, like the end of a club. He wouldn't be able to wait much longer. Maybe he could find some other way to the freight yards.

He heard a slight gasp and when he looked up he saw a little girl staring in at him through the boards of the window. She pointed

in at him and turned her head and yelled, "Look what I found."

He raised up, started to climb out through the boarded window. Rusty nails ripped his clothing. Dust smarted in his eyes. He saw the man in the corduroy jacket, accompanied now by several other men, running toward him. He smiled at the little girl as he went, half falling, out the window. Why did little girls all look so much alike?

The men yelled after him as he ran in an awkward shambling way toward the wall. He fell. He got to his feet, and fell again. The skin scraped off his hands. His pants tore on the jagged concrete.

Strangely, he no longer felt much of anything. He reached the long slide of broken bricks and dug his way up on his hands and knees toward the top of the wall. His fingers felt like nerveless hooks on the dead lumps of his arms. Somewhere he heard a dull roar. The ground shook. As he reached the top of the wall, a dense cloud of yellow sulphurous dust rose up around him in a blinding haze.

The hooked ends of the iron forms used to hold the concrete protruded from the top of the broken wall. As he slid over the top, the hooks dug into his topcoat. Cloth ripped. He hung there in the high cold air trying to loosen himself.

The low ominous swishing sound caused him to stop struggling. There was a heavy sighing that

grew louder the way a whisper does in your sleep.

He stared into the dense yellow dust billowing around him from the crumbled wall. Then he saw the taut cable appear out of the dust, then the great leaden ball sliding out of the cloud toward him.

He struggled once again, but his coat was stuck fast on the metal barbs. His hands slapped against the wall. He kicked at the powdery brick with his heels, squirming and twisting against the wall like an injured fly.

The lead ball that had just broken out a great section of the wall, was coming back again, looming larger and larger, beginning to swell out in all directions, becoming a flat plane, a battered surface, ridged and scarred and stained with reddish-yellow dust.

He yelled out once, knowing it was too late, that no one could hear him. Someone handling the crane wouldn't see him there because of the dust.

The momentum of the leaden ball carried him completely through the wall, and when it stopped in the air to return on its pendulous swing, it released his body and he arched through a rain of shattered bricks and foaming dust.

Looking at it from above, it appeared as though someone had dropped a rag doll or a dummy from a height into the rubble of the vacant lot.

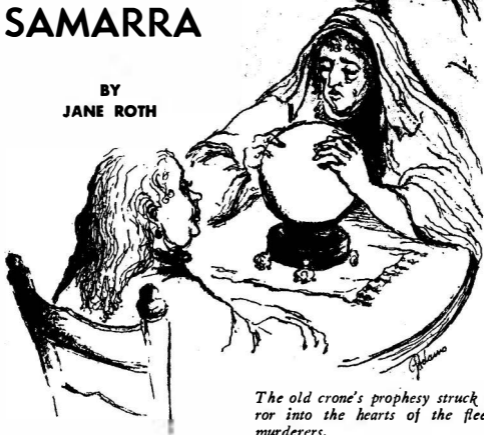
THE MAN WAS TALL and gaunt and ill-shaven; his hair was black and his eyes were dark sockets of hate. He stood before the dirty window of the dingy third-rate motel room and pushed aside the grimy, flowered curtain.

"It's going to rain tonight."

The woman was pudgy and her skin was coarse and her fingernails were bitten raw. She lay sprawled on the rumped, unmade bed, her

ROAD TO SAMARRA

BY
JANE ROTH



The old crone's prophecy struck terror into the hearts of the fleeing murderers.

straw bleached hair mottling the sweat stained pillow. She drew deeply on the saliva-browned stub of a cigarette.

"Good! Then tonight we do it. Huh, Vic?"

He limped across the room and took a swig from the bottle that stood on the table near the bed.

"If it rains," he said. "Then the suckers stay home. There'll be no one on the Midway. And it's been three years. That should be enough."

"No one will remember us."

"No," he said, "no one will remember us."

Her name was Velma. Once she had been slim and brittlely pretty. Once he had been lithe and young and the black sockets of his eyes had had little bulbs in them that lit their way. Three years ago. Now he winced and limped on his shattered hip and she grew fat and pimply and bit her nails. And they grew bitter. And they grew cruel. Together.

"She'll remember," Velma said.

The sharp, clean click of the switch-blade knife in his hand cut the fetid atmosphere like a sliver of blue ice.

"Sure," Vic said, moodily, "She'll remember. We're counting on that."

The Carnival lay glittering in the rain. Up and down the midway the familiar sights and the familiar smells cast their futile lures at ghost hordes in the empty night.

The barker for "Red Rover, the Dog-faced Boy" and "Suetie, the Fat Lady," lolled sadly at the entrance to his tent. Hot dogs grew rancid on greasy grills and the sharpies spun their wheels as they shrilled their tales of fabulous fortune to the desolation. A couple of teen-aged girls in yellow rain coats sloshed through the puddles, giggling. A bearded man with pocketed hands and turned up collar strolled disinterestedly through the shadowy places. A dog barked. Shills played the pinball machines.

Vic and Velma walked slowly, keeping in shadow. Past the shooting gallery. Past the stands with the Kewpie dolls and the stuffed animals, past the baseball throwing game with its soiled weighted caricatures of Hitler and Stalin. Replacements cost money, they knew, and hatred lingers. Past the big tent that held the memories. Then suddenly, too soon, it was before them. *Madame Futura* it said. In big letters. *Palmistry. Fortune telling.* The flap was up and the light was dim within.

"You're sure?" he hissed. "You're sure she's got it?"

"I saw it! I told you! I told you a thousand time. Fifteen years she must have been sockin it in there in the base of that crystal ball. Eighteen now. I saw it, Vic, I tell you! Through the hole in the tent. That night."

"OK" Vic said. "You know what to do . . . Let's go."

In the airless recesses of the dimly lit tent the massive figure huddled, motionless. The Western adventure magazine had been hurriedly tucked beneath voluminous skirts at the sound of their steps, and the wrinkled eyelids in the parchment face drooped over sharp, black pupils. A faded Paisley shawl covered hair that defied time with its inky sheen.

"Come in," the wheedling voice entreated, "Come in Lady. Come in Gentleman. See the future through Futura's eyes."

They stood there with the rain on them in the feeble rays of the shaded lamp. And Velma said, "Hello, Rosie. Remember me?"

There was sudden movement from the cloth-wrapped bulk and the mask became a face. Shrewd, curious, alive. "My Gawd!" the voice was deep and resonant. "If it ain't . . . if it ain't the Two Vees. Big as life!" Her laughter rumbled. "Bigger! Velma, Honey, you sure put it on! But I'd know you. I'd know you both, anywhere."

"We were just passing through," Velma said, "and we saw the show was playing this town. So we thought we'd stop and say hello."

"That was sweet and nice, honey. But you always were. Come, you Vic, sit. Tell me what you been since . . ."

"Nothing much," Vic said. He motioned with his hand to Velma and she sat carefully on the small chair that faced the table where

the enormous glass ball stood waiting. He lit a cigarette with practiced motion. He looked around. He said again, "Nothing much. How's things with you?"

"The same," she shook her large head mournfully. "You know. Not enough suckers. And them there are won't part with a buck if hell froze over. I get by. It ain't much, but I get by."

They sat in silence then. And each knew the other was remembering.

"Tough," Madam Futura said.

"Sure was tough. What happened to you two kids."

Vic shrugged. "That's the breaks."

And Velma said. "Yeah, that's how it goes."

Fortune teller, Vic though. Reader of the future. Don't even know she's going to die. Don't even know it was her fault. All of it. Because she had the money. Because Velma saw it. Because Velma told him. Because Velma told him *that night* before their act went on, and because when your business is flying high in the air over cold concrete, you're not supposed to think of anything but what you're doing. You're not supposed to think of green bills in the base of crystal ball and how to get them. You're not supposed to think of anything in that split second when the air rushes past you — nothing but grabbing the bar. But the bar wasn't there. Only the thought of the

green bills, and the unyielding stone, and the crunch of bone.

In the silence the ball winked. Big and round and cold and shining it glittered at them. Velma looked at Vic. His nod was imperceptible. She looked back at the ball and the panic was thick in her throat as she spoke.

"Rosie . . . would you maybe . . ." She made a slight motion toward the sparkling glass. "You ain't busy, and you know I always took great stock in your readings. Maybe — you could tell us something good."

With a sweeping movement the woman drew her chair forward till she was facing Velma across the table. "Why sure, Honey. Glad to. Got to keep in practice some way. You want it all? Or only the sugar?"

Velma drew a breath. "All."

Vic moved behind her. The fortune teller bent over the glass globe and caressed it with her tapering fingers. It was all in there, Velma knew. All the good and bad that had ever been or ever was to be, and the cold, faceless death that hovered in this room, that was these too. Hidden in a mindless circle of glass.

"It's cloudy." her voice was hypnotic, soothing. "Cloudy, cloudy — now it clears. Now I see — money. I see wealth for you, undreamed of wealth. So much money do I see." Her head began to move to and fro, as her voice droned on. "But the money — it is not good. I do

not know why, but it is not good money. So much, but no good. I see more. Wait! I see . . . I see . . ."

The voice trailed off. The head lifted. And again Vic moved.

Spell-bound Velma cried, "What? What do you see?"

"The ball is cloudy tonight. I cannot tell."

"You saw something. Tell me."

"I cannot. You are my friend."

"Tell me!"

For only a moment the black eyes rested on her face. Then they lowered. "So be it," said Madame Futura. "I see then—an accident. An accident in a motor vehicle. You are there, Vic is there. I see blood. I see an ambulance. I see. . . ."

But Madame Futura was to see no more. Silently Vic had come up behind her, quick and sure the merciless blade ate through the cloth and into the flesh, scraping bone, drinking the blood that welled from deep, deep down. One quick, gasping, choking sound, an unmeasurable second of disbelief, and Madame Futura, Rosie to her friends, was dead.

"Quick," Vic shouted. There was a vile, sick taste in his mouth. He spat. "Help me. We got to get out of here." Velma had not moved. She sat rooted to her seat, turned to stone. Vic grasped her shoulder roughly, shook her, and she began woodenly to obey him.

Trembling, they removed the large glass globe from its base, gouged out the base's metal top,

and there before them lay all their wildest dreams. Bills. Some crisp, some worn, some folded or rolled, some just stuffed. Tens and twenties. More than their imaginations could have conceived.

"Jeez . . . ze . . ." Vic murmured.

They stuffed all their pockets and Velma's large purse in two brown paper bags they found on the shelf. They switched off the little lamp and, as they were leaving, closed the tent flap after them. They fled into the rain and the darkness.

Vic had parked the car on a quiet street a block from the carnival entrance. They climbed in and he started the motor. There was about them both now a soaring sense of elation and urgency mixed with panic. They were drugged with the horror and the fulfilment. The car roared through the night.

"They may not find her till morning," Vic said. "If we're lucky we can be five hundred miles away from here by then. And who'll think of us. Because we waited, like I told you, three long years. Because we played it smart."

"We played it smart," echoed Velma, parrot-like.

"If we'd have gone after it right away like you wanted to, some one would have thought of us. We were broke, everyone knew that. But 'wait' I said. Follow her around. Keep out of sight. See, Baby. You gotta listen to me. We're all right now."

"Yeah," Velma said, "we're all

right now. Because we played it smart."

"Take the suitcase," Vic told her. "Put the money under the clothes. Tear those bags in little pieces and throw them out the window. We'll be five hundred miles from here by morning. In three days we'll be in Mexico."

The rain had stopped and the car sped along through clouds of mist that formed and billowed and cleared and billowed again. Velma had locked their fortune in the suitcase and placed it on the rear seat. She had torn up the paper bags and passed them out the window. She lit a cigarette and puffed nervously, staring straight ahead.

"It's all hokum, isn't it?" Velma said.

He did not take his eyes from the road. "Sure, Baby. You know that."

"She was good, though." She managed a snicker. "A good hokum artist."

"Real good."

"Always told people they were going to get money. People like to hear that."

"Mmm."

"Sure was right this time. Wasn't she?"

"Sure was."

"She was right a lot of times," Velma mused. "Back when we was doing the act. She told me about Momma having the operation. A day before I got the telegram. She told me we were going to have suc-

cess. A week later we got more money and top billing. Yeah, Vic. She was right a lot of times."

"So she was right. Do you have to talk about her?"

"Seem like I can't stop thinking about her. How she looked at me—just before . . ."

"If she was so smart," Vic sneered, "how come she didn't know what we were gonna do?"

"I keep asking myself that. How come she didn't. Unless, maybe . . . because it was my fortune she was telling . . . and not her own. Maybe it's good she wasn't telling her own. Huh, Vic?"

"It's hokum. You know that, Baby. For the suckers."

"Yeah. For the suckers."

Ahead the rain-slicked road unwound, ribbon-like, in the glare of their lights. Nothing was visible but the shadow of trees, the shape of an occasional house, a billboard or a road marker now and then. No cars behind them, none coming toward them. Yet gently, imperceptibly, the pressure of his foot on the gas pedal lessened. And, in the silence, Velma peered at the speedometer.

"Vic."

"Yeah."

"Do you *hafta* go so fast?"

Angrily, defiantly, the foot pressed down again and the car leaped forward. "Yes, I do. We gotta be five hundred miles away by morning. We played it smart. We're gonna keep playing it smart.

We ain't gonna let no small time gyp artist with a glass immie foul us up now. Are we, Baby?"

"No. But I keep thinking—how she was right about the money."

The fog billowed and cleared and billowed again. The road curved and straightened and curved. The trees along the highway were thick, shapeless masses and there was no light but theirs.

"Vic . . ."

"Yeah."

"Please don't go so fast. . . ."

Gradually his foot relaxed again and with a queer feeling of relief he conceded.

Morning came, gray and forbidding. There was no sun. They stopped for gas at a run down station on the outskirts of a small town. They ate soggy, packaged crackers and drank coke. They started again.

Vic felt drowsy. He kept the needle hovering at 40. He braked at each intersection, at each curve, at each approaching vehicle. Each time his foot moved he felt Velma stiffen, quiver. "Got to humor her," he thought. "Crazy dame to be so scared. But I got to humor her."

Through the long, muggy sunless day they drove. Traffic was sparse and they spoke very little. They stopped only for gas and food. And slowly the poison spread.

Later, when it was dark again, Vic pulled the car off the road in a deserted spot. They huddled together and slept. Fitfully.

Velma woke suddenly in a cold

sweat. "Vic. Oh, my God. Something hit us. There was glass all over and blood. Vic, it was awful." She sobbed and chewed her nails and clung to him. "Vic—can't we—take the train or walk—or something? I can't help it, Vic, I keep thinking about her, how she looked, how she . . . knew. Maybe she did know. There was always something sorta crazy about her. Maybe it wasn't hokum. Maybe there really was things in that ball that she alone could see. Vic, I can't stand it, we gotta do something."

He smoothed her shoulder. "Now, baby. Don't let it get you. You had a bad dream. It won't be long now. Two days we'll be in Mexico. Then you won't have to ride any more."

"I can't stay in this car. I can't. I'll go crazy."

"Velma, you got to. I'll go slow. I promise I'll go slow."

"Only twenty-five, Viv. Promise."

"But, Baby, we'll never . . ."

"You gotta promise me, Viv."

"OK, twenty-five."

They sat and smoked till dawn.

The day that followed was nightmarish. The sun shone brightly and the wide, clean highway stretched before them mockingly as they plodded along growing more numb with each passing hour as the terror grew. They tried, at first, to talk of other things; of the fortune within arms reach, the dream that would come true, the new life that was to be. But they

could not. Always, somehow, their thoughts and their words were drawn, magnetized, back to that dreaded subject, and the bright day was clouded with visions of the shapeless hulk in the dark tent, back some thousand miles, that held them in its spell of fear.

Each gas station became an oasis. Each traffic light a deep, sucking breath of relief. A reason to stop. An excuse, even for a moment, not to have to ride.

It was early afternoon. They were weary, they were hungry, they were terribly afraid. They had not spoken for hours. It was then that Velma got the idea.

She took her finger from her mouth. It was bloody where she had gnawed it. "Vic. I been thinking."

"Yeah," he said, wearily, "I know."

"No. I got an idea."

He nodded. A red convertible roared past them. Their speedometer jiggled two dots above the twenty-five. Vic moved his foot.

"Vic, listen to me! Suppose you're worried about something that's gonna happen. Like us. And then it *does* happen. Then you ain't worried no more. Cause it's finished. Right?"

"You crazy or something?"

"No, no, Vic, you gotta listen! She said we was gonna have an accident. So we keep thinking about it and we're scared. We know it's hokum, but all the same, you got-

ta remember how she was right about the money and Momma and . . . and everything. So, suppose we was to make her be right again. Suppose we *did* have an accident. Then we wouldn't have to worry no more about it."

He laughed. "Jeez . . . you *are* nuts! We wouldn't have to worry about nothing else either."

"No, Vic. I mean a little accident. You could *make* one. You're good with cars. You could just . . . ram into a tree or a pole, and just bust a fender or something. Fenders don't cost much. But we'd have an accident. And it would be finished."

He darted a quick look at her. She grasped his sleeve. She was eager. "Huh, Vic?"

"You know, Baby . . . maybe you ain't so dumb at that."

"Ain't it a good idea, Vic?"

"Play it smart," he murmured. "Play it smart. Then we'd have nothing to worry about."

"Will you do it?"

"I gotta think, Velma, We'd get a lot of attention that way. Have to have the car fixed. People would see it. Maybe cops."

"So what, cops? We ain't suspected of nothin'. Wouldn't be in a million years. You said so yourself."

"I know, I know. Shut up a minute." His brow furrowed, his fingers clutched the wheel. Maybe he *could* get away with it."

"Yeah, Vic. Then we'd never hafta think of . . . her . . . no more."

"Next town we come to. Gotta

be near a town so's we can have it fixed. Ram into a tree. Real slow. Shake us up. Bust a fender. Play it smart — just in case. That would *do* it, Baby."

The wheels of the car kept turning and slowly, slowly the miles slid beneath them. Vic and Thelma felt a new elation now that the end of their agonizing torment was in sight. There was always a way if you played it smart.

At two o'clock they saw the sign that said *Newton, 3 miles . . . Population 13,000. Drive crefully.*

"O.K., Baby," Vice said. "This is it."

"Here?"

"A little ways farther. 'Bout a mile out of town. Don't want to have to walk too far if there ain't no service station. I'll tell you when."

"O.K., Vic, I ain't scared — now."

A few scattered houses, set back from the road. A store or two. A low factory building. A gas station. Trees. Telephone poles.

"Get ready, Baby," Vic said. "Hold tight. I'm gonna light a cigarette, so's I'll have a reason to tell 'em I lost control for a minute. O.K. Here we go!"

He stepped their speed up a few notches. He held an unlighted cigarette in one hand and a pack of matches in the other. He coiled the fingers of his left hand around the steering wheel and jerked it sharply to the right. Velma closed her eyes. She screamed. There was a

sickening, tearing, crunching jolt. It flung Velma forward from the seat she tried to cling to, slamming her head against the windshield. There was a dizzy moment of blackness and then she opened her eyes and Vic was bending over her.

"Velma. You O.K.?"

She sat up slowly. She nodded. Her head ached, and a slow, warm stream of blood coursed over her right eyelid. But that was all. It was over.

Outside the dust was settling and the people were gathering. It was funny how quickly a crowd could gather even on the outskirts of a sleepy little town like this, Velma thought.

A man dressed in overalls opened the car door. "You folks O.K.?"

"Yeah," Vic said, "Yeah, sure. We're O.K." He grimaced at his crumpled fender where it rested against the massive tree trunk. "How the heck did I do a stupid thing like that?"

"Good you were going slow," a woman remarked. She clucked solicitously at Velma, who was mopping her forehead with her handkerchief. Relieved.

A siren sounded in the distance, drawing nearer. Vic stood with the group, examining the battered front of his car. He had never known you could feel so good about a smashed fender. He tried to look upset. He kept shaking his head and muttering, but all he felt was

relief. Once again they had played it smart. Him and Velma.

The white City Hospital ambulance pulled up, dispersing the chattering crowd. An interne jumped out, looked around.

The interne went to Velma. She leaned back against the seat, gratefully, and let him examine her.

"That's a nasty cut, lady. Needs a few stitches. May be a slight concussion too. Better come down to the hospital with us.

Vic looked at Velma. She shrugged a little. "May as well," she said. They'll havta tow the car in anyway. They'll clean my head up nice at the hospital and put a bandage on it."

The interne led the way to the ambulance, flung open the rear doors and helped them in. Velma sat on a little white cot and Vic sat beside her. The suitcase rested on the floor between them. The siren sounded and the ambulance sped toward town.

Vic reached for Velma's hand. She sighed happily and smiled at him. It was over. It was done. It had all come true. They were free of Madame Futura forever.

Closeted in the small space they couldn't see the turn. They never heard the driver's scream. They never knew anything at all, as the ambulance, rounding a corner too quickly, smashed headlong into the stalled tank truck, crumpled, turned over and burst into flame.

AFTER SIXTY SECONDS of television commercial, the large man came to the screen for his epilogue. He sighed regretfully. "Of course Miss Haskins, the tea cup murderer, was apprehended by the vigilant police eventually. We thought

you might like to know that if you can't stand those happy endings for bad people." He closed his eyes for a moment of critical distaste. "And next week we'll be bringin' you the strange story . . ."

I adjusted my glasses and con-

FAIR PLAY

"I won't kill you with arsenic," she said. "It's too easy to detect."



BY
JACK RITCHIE

sulted our program guide.

My wife Edna's voice was rich with scorn. "That stupid woman. Arsenic is out. It's too easy to detect. An autopsy gets them every time."

I got up and switched to another channel. "What would you use, dear?"

I regulated the brightness and the sound and returned to my easy chair. I folded my hands. About a minute later, it came to me. Edna hadn't answered the question.

I turned my head to look at her.

Her fingers were busy with her knitting, but her eyes were in a world that brought a self-satisfied smile to her lips.

I felt a draft of uneasiness. "Are you all right?"

She remembered me and frowned. "Who said I'd use poison? I haven't mentioned a thing about it." The ice cubes in her glass of soda rattled as she took a sip.

My eyes went back to the television set. A detective was describing the wretched city he lived in. It was hot and humid and Tuesday and twelve minutes after eight when he checked in at headquarters.

I stole a glance at Edna. She was still Madame Defarge to me after fifteen years of marriage. Her lips moved, counting the stitches, but I had the feeling she was simply practicing for something bigger.

I tapped the tips of my fingers together and watched the set. A

woman's body had been discovered. She had been brutally beaten. Her husband couldn't be found. Suspicion? Murder.

I leaned forward.

Edna's voice was sharp. "Can't you get something else?"

I was defensive. "Now be fair, Edna. Just because this time the victim is a woman I don't think . . ."

Her eyes were cold. "I said I wanted another channel. That means right now."

Edna is a big woman and I am a small man. I have been aware of this for some time. I turned to a quiz program. A taxi driver was making his twenty-seventh appearance.

"Henry," Edna asked after a while. "Have you paid the premium on your insurance this month?"

"Yes, dear. And I paid yours too."

She sniffed. "I still think it's a waste of money to insure me."

"No, it isn't dear," I said absently. "You never know when something might happen."

She stared at me with narrow eyes.

I got to my feet. "I'm out of cigars, dear. I think I'll go down to Miller's and get some. I'll be right back."

It was a thoughtful walk for me. I played with a suspicion.

Mr. Miller handed me the five nickle cigars. "Did you get rid of the rats, Henry?"

I lit a cigar. "What rats?"

"The ones your wife talked about when she got the poison."

I rolled the cigar in my mouth pensively.

Mr. Miller chuckled. "Don't you worry about her poisoning you, Henry. That stuff I sold her is harmless to dogs, cats, and humans." He kept grinning. "She seemed a little disappointed when I told her."

My cigar seemed to taste better.

He leaned on the counter. "Besides, if she wanted to poison you, Henry, she could just as well get something better from that brother of hers. He's a chemist too and he can lay his hands on all kinds of stuff."

I could see Gerald's sneaky face right now. I had to look at it eight hours a day at the laboratory.

On the walk back home, I ground my teeth several times.

Edna's eyes held a glitter when I entered the living room. "If you're hungry, you'll find two sandwiches in the refrigerator. They're wrapped in wax paper."

I was thoughtful as I walked into the kitchen. The sandwiches were on the second shelf.

I unwrapped one and lifted the top slice of rye.

Ah, ha! On the swiss cheese, and principally in the holes, I detected small grains of a white powder.

The second sandwich was exactly the same.

By George, she wanted to make sure.

I was quietly furious and almost stamped my foot.

Emma was rushing me into immediate action.

I hadn't planned to get rid of her until the end of the week.

I re-wrapped the sandwiches and hid them behind a canister on one of the top cabinet shelves.

I went to the refrigerator. Yes, I thought, lettuce and tomato sandwiches. Edna liked them because they were low in calories.

I prepared two and cut them diagonally.

I smiled to myself and rubbed my hands. Now for the seasoning. I got the small cardboard carton I'd hidden in the toe of my overshoes in the back hall and used the powder liberally on one of the sandwiches. I thought that was clever of me. I might have to eat the other, one if Edna got suspicious.

I had just returned the poison to my hiding place when Edna walked into the kitchen.

Her eyes flicked to the sandwiches. "What are you doing?"

I laughed lightly. "Just making you a couple of sandwiches, dear."

Her eyes surveyed them suspiciously. "How come?"

"Now, dear," I said. "You act as though I'd never made sandwiches for you before."

"Let's just say you never volunteered until now." She looked me over carefully. "Did you eat your sandwiches?"

"Yes, dear."

"Hm," she said slowly. "I must say that you ate them extremely fast." She made her voice casual. "How did they taste?"

"Delicious, dear." I smiled and raised an inquiring eyebrow. "Well . . . perhaps just a trifle metallic?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I told you that only a fool would use . . ." She frowned and went to the step-on garbage can. "Well, I see that you ate the wax paper too."

She came back to the kitchen table and put her hands on her hips. She picked up a sandwich and lifted a triangle of bread.

The woman didn't trust me.

At the same time, however, I was pleased. My powder had melted and left no trace.

Edna eyed me thoughtfully. "Why don't you have one of these too, Henry?"

I picked a section of the safe sandwich, but I didn't get it to my mouth.

Her hand went over my wrist. "I'll take that one."

She smiled like a cat as she elevated it to her mouth.

I smiled too. It was just a nervous smile, but evidently Edna didn't think so.

She put the sandwich down uneaten. "I don't believe I'm hungry. I'll just have a glass of milk."

Edna got the bottle out of the refrigerator and poured herself a glass. She paused and her eyes searched me.

She went to the cupboard and got a bowl. "On second thought, I believe I'll make eggnog." Her smile was firm. "For both of us. You watch what I put into it because you're going to drink half of it. I wouldn't want either one of us to get indigestion."

When the nog was done, I took a very small sip and waited.

Edna did the same and indicated that it was now my turn.

It took us ten minutes to finish our glasses.

We both felt quite confident as we went back into the living room to watch television.

The Inspector, a man with an eye patch, was explaining an interesting point. "Ah," he said. "The reason Mr. Lawrence did not succumb, even though he drank the same tea as Sir Anthony, is that he had, through the course of months, built up an immunity to the poison. Every day he took just a little bit, until . . ."

Edna beat me to the bathroom. I had to go out into the back yard.

I didn't sleep that night and I know that Edna didn't either. I lay in the moonlight, quite hungry, and evaluated the situation. It was absolutely clear. We were antagonists and only one of us could survive. The cleverer one.

That was what put the issue in doubt.

I considered other methods. A blunt instrument? Good heavens, no. Edna would probably wrest the

weapon from me and bash my brains in.

Hire a killer? But where could I find one? Besides, he would probably be too expensive. Edna would never give me the money.

I wasn't worried about disposing of the body. That would be simple. I would drive out into the country late at night and find a secluded place to bury her. The police would be suspicious about her disappearance, of course, but what could they prove without a body?

The real problem was to get her to take the poison.

The answer came to me at five o'clock in the morning. I sat up in bed, pleased with myself.

Edna rose on one elbow. "Why the hell don't you go to sleep?"

I was elated by the tone of her voice. Evidently she hadn't come up with anything yet.

I got up at seven and went downstairs. Edna hadn't made my breakfast in fourteen years and I knew that she wouldn't start now. Not even to keep an eye on me.

She was probably lying in bed, smiling to herself, and thinking that I could adulterate anything I had a mind to, but she wouldn't be tricked into tasting a thing in the house. Perhaps she was even hoping that I'd manage to poison myself with some devilish thing she'd spiked.

I chuckled to myself as I made my solution and poured it into the tray.

At seven-thirty I left the house so that I could have a leisurely and secure breakfast at a cafeteria before going to the laboratory.

During the course of the day I beamed at Gerald twice. The first time he dropped an Erlenmeyer flask. The second, he burned the small finger of his left hand with a mild solution of hydrochloric acid.

At five, I was out of my lab coat and going to the elevators.

When I reached my house, I opened the front door with my key and listened.

There was silence. Big beautiful silence.

Out of respect for the dead, I walked into the living room on tiptoe.

Edna lay sprawled on the sofa, an empty glass on the rug next to her. She had taken the pause to refresh that I had anticipated, and she had paid for it. I notice that she had been careful. The large bottle of soda on the cocktail table was a different brand from those in the refrigerator. She must have gone out to get it.

I bent over her to make certain that she was dead. There was still a certain formidability about her, but it was not that of the living.

I went into the kitchen and emptied all the ice cube trays into the sink. It hadn't entered Edna's mind that there was enough poison in any one of the cubes to kill two or three people.

I felt a sense of freedom. Of exhilaration, actually.

Perhaps that is what gave me the physical strength to drag Edna's body to the car later that night.

Really, that woman was grossly over-weight.

It was beautiful and star-lit in the country and when I cleaned the earth from my shovel, the moon still rode high in the early morning sky.

I drove home with the window of my car open and drank the bracing air.

I'd have to get rid of all the food in the house, of course. Everything that was eatable and drinkable. I smiled to myself. I couldn't very well allow Edna to kill me now that she was dead.

And I'd have to report Edna's disappearance to the police. There would be no elaborations. I would simply state that she had left last night, saying that she was going to a neighborhood movie, and that she hadn't returned.

I hadn't noticed her absence until this morning because I had gone

to bed early.

At home, I went to bed and slept until the alarm rang. I sang in my shower and then went to the bathroom mirror to shave.

Poor Edna. That ice cube business had been pure genius. The old brain was really clicking that time.

I thought about poisons fondly as I shaved. About the varieties and classes, the metallics, the alkaloids.

Now take curare, for instance. It has to be injected directly into the blood stream itself to be effective. Perhaps I should have tried one of the derivatives we have at the laboratory.

I dabbed iodine on a small cut on my chin.

That stuff was so powerful that even if you diluted it with . . .

I stared at my reflection and my hand went to the cut.

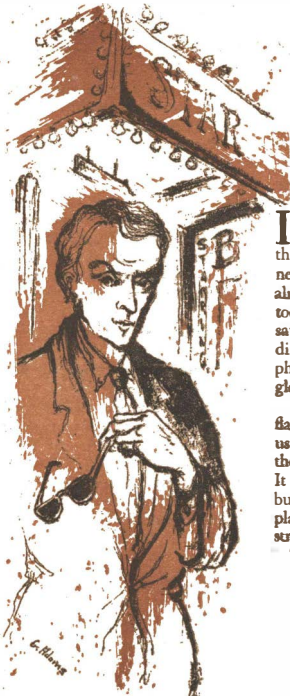
"Now, Edna," I said out loud. "That was a dirty trick."

I shook my head at the insidiousness of it.

"That was really . . . really . . . a dirty . . ."

The next exciting issue of MANHUNT will be on your newsstand March 26. Ask your news-dealer to have your copy reserved.

THE DOUBLE TAKE



I took a look through the plane window, past my reflection, into the dusk covering Las Vegas. The neon orgasms along the Strip had already begun their come-on. I took a look at my reflection and saw a dim nobody. I smiled. The dim nobody faded me, smiling a phantom smile against the growing glow.

The *No Smoking* warning flashed on and the stewardess told us in her screen test voice to *fasten the seat belts*. The nobody smiled. It was fitting, my undertaking this business on Halloween. The big plane softened down like a broomstraw.

The look of recognition began

BY
EDWARD WELLEN

In glittering Las Vegas a glamorous movie star gambles for his career with murder.

lighting up faces as soon as I left the men's room at the airport. The mustache I had winged in with nested now in my suitcase, waiting beside a vial of spirit gum for the flight out. Also in the suitcase was my hat; the brim had shadow-masked the upper part of my face.

To some, the face was familiar but because of the dark glasses or a shaky memory they couldn't exactly place it. To others, the face was a cinch to make. Whatever the degrees Kelvin, I never got used to the light of recognition in the eyes of people I'd never met.

Always inside me the tug of war; to respond—to hold back. Usually I responded with the quizzical Rick Bishop grin. It cost nothing—only an extra effort when I wasn't in a grinning mood—and it paid off. Right now another weighting in favor of the grin was the rascally role in the latest Rick Bishop flicker. It would be safer. I've known guys who've played heavies to walk down the street and have little old ladies whack away at them with umbrellas. The quizzical Rick Bishop grin would melt outrage to a smiling headshake and a wagging finger.

So I worked the quizzical Rick Bishop grin as I strode through the throng. But I was careful to seem a bit preoccupied so they wouldn't realize now that it wasn't quite the real thing.

I caught them nudging one another and whispering—"click-hiss,"

Rick Bishop—and my walk forged a chain of audible and visible O's. As I headed for the cab stand I ran into a brace of schoolgirls. I braced myself.

Sure enough, I was squealed in. The bolder one, naturally the one that seemed the more demure, demanded my autograph. I smiled the Rick Bishop smile and scribbled the Rick Bishop scribble.

This performance had become so automatic that I could easily keep up with what was going on around me. I knew I was getting the three kinds of reactions from the men passing by—the liking smiles from those who identified with Rick Bishop, the hating smiles from those who envied Rick Bishop, and the yawning smiles from those who were very very indifferent to Rick Bishop.

I finally made it with a whole skin to the cab stand.

The cabby did a phony doubletake. He was playing it complicated, letting me feel that the thought of the fat tip was all that kept him from acting bored. The old reverse con.

"Where to, Mr. Bishop?"

His tone said he was a guy who knew what it was all about. Nobody could take *him*.

"The Mockingbird, friend."

I overdid the Rick Bishop grin and made my voice ring false.

I meant it to bother him and it worked. He was frowning and silent on the ride, sneaking a glance

at me from time to time in the mirror.

The ride in. Past the motels, past the raceless racetrack, past the big spots—the Last Frontier, the Flamingo, the Sahara, the Sands—on the Strip, past the used car lots—“Drive a bargain!”, past the lines of palms that showed the way Nature could be when Man took a hand. Then into the heart of downtown Las Vegas. Past a theater playing the latest Rick Bishop film; overshadowing the box office a huge statue of our hero flashing a sword. Down Fremont to Sixth and the cab was pulling up at the Mockingbird.

Across from the Mockingbird another hotel-casino—or to put first things first, casino-hotel—was beckoning, piling up rings of light like a stack of five-buck markers.

Speaking of money, I deliberately blunted Rick Bishop's reputation as a good tipper. I left my friend the cabby staring at his palm.

A safari got me to the desk safely. Managerial coattails fluttered over for the occasion. I had no reservation, but that was all right. There was always room at the inn for Rick Bishop.

The manager clasped his hands and held them in frozen applause as if heaping his biceps or, more likely, trapping a fly. He had a lot of smile.

“You're not here with an act?” He rested his head on one shoulder. It was a cute trick. It would've been

cuter if his eyes lit up *Tilt!* “I pride myself on keeping up with all the bookings in town and I don't recall your having one.”

“I'm not here with an act,” I said. “In fact, if anyone asks, I'm not here, period.”

“Yes, Mr. Bishop.” He was busting with tact. “Certainly, Mr. Bishop.” And discretion. “I quite understand, Mr. Bishop.”

He could hardly hold himself in his terribly Brooks Bros. suit until I was in the elevator. I could picture him fluttering to phone his favorite Hollywood columnist.

Which? I said “which” to myself again, this time thinking of Halloween, and smiled. It really didn't matter which. I knew along what lines the talk would be humming.

Are you sure, darling? I understood that as soon as Heaven and Earth was in the can Rick took off with his manager on a hunting trip to some Godforsaken wilderness.

I'm sure, darling. I know Rick Bishop when I see him.

Hold on a moment, darling . . . Darling?

Yes, darling, I'm still here.

My source at the studio tells me Diana—Diana Foss, you know, Rick's wife?—is at this very moment on the lot busy doing retakes for “The Temple Keeper.” My, my. And they're billed as quite the lovebirds. Darling, this could be a scoop. Scoop; screen columnists were the only newspaper people

who talked like the screen version of newspaper people. *Do keep your eyes open, darling. For the "Other Woman."*

I will, darling.

If this pans out, darling, the Mockingbird will be "the favorite desert haunt of film folk" in my column.

Bless you, darling.

I was glad when the elevator's stopping broke the connection. That was enough of that. The bellhop flung open the door of my room with a broad gesture to get a laugh. He mugged a bit as he felt for the switch. Everyone was auditioning.

Abracandelabra! And there was light. The false fronts of the old western towns—one story masquerading as two—carried over into the new. Shelves of dummy books, wallpaper pretending to be adobe, artificial fruit, fireplace in which on cool evenings an electrical glow would redden plastic logs.

The comedian bowed out. I don't know how much richer he was; I forked out the first crumpled bill I found.

I flopped into a chair. Unpacking could wait. Everything could wait. I was going to take it by stages. I phoned for a gin fizz. I loosened up outside — tie, jacket, shoes — while waiting to loosen up inside. I turned the television on. A dramatized doctor was putting on white coat and rubber gloves to deliver a commercial. Medicine Avenue. I

turned the television off. The gin fizz came. I leaned way back in my chair and watched the glass sweat.

I woke up sweating. Not to cite chapter and verse, I had taken in the dinner show, then played a bit, bucking the roulette wheel. Centrifugal force spun my luck away and I dropped a couple of G's and the house got the Rick Bishop autograph on a check. I passed up the midnight show for the sack.

I was packing away a late breakfast in the grill. I had a corner table to myself. I concentrated on eating, ignoring the eyeing and whispering of those who had spotted Rick Bishop. I heard a telltale stir and I cursed silently, sensing what was coming. I looked up.

Two men were weaving through the tables, heading my way. They were weaving more than the table-spotting called for, weaving with weighty feet and weightier apologies. I swore under my breath. All I needed was to tangle with drunks.

I hadn't finished eating but I wanted to sign the tab and get out. But my waiter was out sneaking a smoke or phoning his broker or goosing the cook. I gauged the distance to the men's room and knew I couldn't make it gracefully. I sat there pretending to eat.

The table darkened and I glanced up. One was big and paunchy and they had run short of necks when he came along. He had a blotchy face drooping with heavy features.

The other was tall and wrinkled and they had been giving away necks when he came along. He had a pasty face holding a long bony nose in place.

The heavy one grabbed the edge of the table with both hands to prop himself and shoved his face close to mine. I wrinkled my nose only a little and kept on eating. He stared at me then turned his head and spoke over his shoulder.

"Wearing dark glasses. Indoors. A real Hollywood phony."

His friend put a spidery hand on a fleshy arm.

"Now, Frank." His voice wasn't quite as thick as Frank's.

Frank shook off the hand.

"Now, Frank, nothing." He stared at me some more. "Look at him, Steve. What's so special about him? He eats like anyone else and I'll bet he—"

Steve cut in quickly.

"I liked you in your last film, Rick old man. The way you gave it to that big guy." He nearly lost his balance giving the air the old one-two, showing me the way the big guy got it. "Yessir, Rick, you got nerves of steel. You don't talk much, Rick, but you know what it's all about and you get things done. When you kinda smile and get that cold look in your eye, man, they beter watch out."

A 91 proof snort. "Ah, you knot head, he don't do none of them things. A stand-in, no, a stunt man, that's it, a stunt man, does them

things." He pushed his face closer. "Ain't that right?"

I bit, chewed, and swallowed.

He pushed himself erect, like the first man.

"Put down that ham sandwich and answer me."

He held his fist up like someone about to knock on a door. A guy that got his muscles elbow-bending. He'd be easy to take. It was tempting.

But a wild swing of his just might get by my guard. I couldn't afford a blow to the eye. I sat tight.

"Yellow," he said. He spat.

I heard a buzzing. I didn't know if it came from the tables around me or from inside my head. I felt my face get stiff as a wooden mask.

Slowly I took off the dark glasses. Very slowly. Then I kinda smiled and got that cold look in my eye.

With glimmerings of alarm Frank sought support in the eyes around him. What he got was Steve grabbing his arm and whispering fiercely, "I *told* you to stop shooting off your mouth." Steve's eyes apologized to me and he jerked his chin at Frank. "He's always doing that, Mr. Bishop. Doesn't mean anything. Nice guy when he's sober."

Frank was rapidly becoming a nice guy. He saved face by letting Steve lead him away. He muttered, "He's lucky he's wearing glasses, all I say."

By the time I polished off the sandwich my old acquaintance the

waiter had come from his smoking or phoning or goosing. I signaled. As he drew near, my eyes swept past an adjoining table, stopped, returned to it. A ferret-faced man was watching with a smile that said he had been watching for some time.

I put my dark glasses on again, a bit too quickly. The waiter was waiting. I cleared my throat and ordered, a bit too loudly, Turkish coffee.

The man's smile deepened. He came over, hard on the waiter's unhurrying heels, with his drink in his hand. His voice was a dry rasping like the palms in a push of wind.

"You handled that drunk neatly, Rick. I remember when you would've flattened him."

I glanced up, smiling at him and frowning at my memory.

"Let's see, you're—?"

"Zack Noble."

"Zack Noble. Of course."

I took his hand. Like using an eel for a pump handle.

"I'm on the *Examiner* now."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Sorry, I'm not giving out any interviews."

For all the reacting he did he might have been listening to a cereal. He put his hand on the back of a chair.

"Mind if I—?"

I frowned.

"No interview, Rick. Just talk."

I wiped off the frown and ges-

tered that the chair was his. He sat down.

"Thanks, Rick." His breath whistled like walking corduroy. He took a sip, shooting a glance at me. "Hear from Janice Fogg lately?"

"Janice Fogg? No, not for ages." I smiled confidently. "That's all behind me. I'm a married man."

He smiled at his drink. He took another slow sip.

The waiter came, bearing the Turkish coffee with its topping of froth. The man finished his drink in a gulp. I nodded at the empty glass revolving in his hand and catching the light.

"What'll you have?"

"Why, thanks. Gin."

"One gin," I told the waiter.

The waiter went. I lifted the cup and took a deep whiff of the hot thick sweet smell. I smiled across the table at the man.

I could picture him in a boxlike hall bedroom pressing his pants under the mattress while dreaming his dreams. I could picture him waking up to the cheshire grin of dentures and grabbing a hair of the dog. I could picture him dressing, pulling his collar down a bit on the skin side of the fold, when tying his tie, to hide the fraying edge.

He kept darting glances at me, avoiding meeting my eyes. His fingers drummed the table until I looked at them. His breath whistled and became words.

"Your latest is another costume thing?"

I nodded, then shook my head smiling.

"No interview, remember?"

"Only passing time." He took a sip of air. "They go to a lot of trouble to make the settings authentic, don't they?"

I nodded, swallowing the syrupy stuff with an appreciative smile.

"Then why does it never turn out real?"

I shrugged. I downed more coffee before I answered.

"Real enough at the box-office."

The gin came. The man took hold of the glass with nervous quickness. He gazed through the glass, drank deep, and shivered. He smiled and rubbed his hands, warming himself with self-satisfaction. His skin burned a bit darker. His voice burred a bit thicker.

"But then, who's to say what's really real? The faking of history is part of the making of history. Take Stalin."

"You take Stalin."

"All right, then, take Freud. Part of the mind screens reality. Like wearing colored glasses against the blinding sun."

"You take Freud and—"

He cut in with a tight smile. "All right, then, take you."

"Me?"

"Your dark glasses. Why?"

"You tell me."

"Because your eyes are a different color than Rick's."

I nodded at his glass.

"You must've started real early. I am Rick."

His eyes met mine and fell, but he shook his head.

"Close. But not Rick."

I shoved my chair back.

"I can take just so much."

"Cut the act. I'll tell you how you gave yourself away."

I hitched my chair closer.

He gazed at the top of my head.

"The part should be on the other side. You should've held Rick's picture up to the mirror for comparison."

I took a sip of coffee.

He pointed to the cup.

"I was with Rick first time he tried Turkish coffee. He spat it out. He said the rosewater in it sickened him."

I smiled.

"You can change a part. You can acquire a taste."

"All right. Those are small things. But you gave yourself away on the big ones, my friend."

"Oh?"

"Janice Fogg is the real name of Diana Foss. Diana Foss is only Rick's wife."

My smile took a twist. I spread my hands out wide, palms up.

"You got me, Zack."

He laughed. His laughing came to a choking stop.

"I'm not Zack Noble. I'm Joe Little, as Rick would very well

know. I was his press agent in the early days. I helped him reach the big time. He didn't need me any more after that."

He drained his glass and I managed to catch the waiter's eye for a refill.

"Thanks," Joe said. He rang his fingernail against the glass when it came. "And I'm not on the *Examiner*. I'm on this." He lifted the drink halfway and paused. "Who am I drinking with?"

"You looking for a way to get back on the *Examiner*?"

"If you mean am I planning on printing this, no." He smiled. "No interview, remember?"

I took off my glasses. He met my eyes briefly and nodded.

"Black. Rick's eyes are blue."

"I'm Denis Omrat," I said.

He gave me a wicked grin.

"I'll bet. But it makes no never mind. You gave up your identity, to trade on Rick's."

I toyed with my spoon.

"I can't help my face," I said.

"No. You let it help you."

"Help me?" I said bitterly. "When I can't get a part, not even a walk-on, because I look too much like him?"

He scratched his chin, watching me out of the tail of his eye. He nodded.

"I can see how it would be hard on you. I suppose you have to act?"

"Even if I didn't have the itch I don't know any other trade."

"Tough," he said. "I know. They

don't take a man for what he is. They take him for what he seems to be."

He drained his glass and I signaled for a refill.

"I know," he said. "I'm a victim of type-casting too."

"Oh? Who do they take you for?"

"Not who, what. A shifty character. Not you," he said to the waiter, who stiffened a bit in the act of handing him the glass. "Weak eyes; water if I fix them. Sharp features. That makes me sly. So I always lean over backward. The Chinese say never bend down to tie your shoes in someone's melon patch or reach up to straighten your hat in someone's peach orchard. No use. Everyone expects me to lie, cheat, steal. You wear a mask and feel naked."

I shook my head compassionately.

"Oh, it works out," he said with a crooked smile. "My looks inspire confidence in my shiftiness. I get plenty of shady offers."

Behind his face was a lost boy. I had to mask a smile.

"But I don't take them all," he was saying. "I like to think I'm a man of honor." A sigh whistled out. "That's the hell of it." He took several gulps, glancing at me over the glass. "I don't like your face," he said suddenly, his voice thicker. "Nothing personal, you understand."

"I understand."

"It's just you look too much like him for me to like you."

I polished my glasses briskly. When I put them on, the static on the lenses seemed to draw not only my eyelashes but my eyeballs. I leaned an elbow on the table and covered the lower part of my face with my hand.

"Better?"

"He's a phony," Joe said looking into his glass. "Walk around him and he's like the scenery on the sound stages." A liquid philosophical pause. "No, that isn't fair. There is another side to him. He believes in himself—or in what he believes is himself. The daring roles he's taken have given him a picture of himself as daring. Brought out the reckless streak in hic makeup." Another liquid philosophical pause. "Maybe it isn't recklessness but vanity. Or are they the same thing?" A liquid moment of musing. "Anyway, it leads him to believe he can get away with murder. He doesn't care who he hurts."

His glass was empty. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip.

"If you want another I'll order it," I said. "But don't you think you've had enough?"

He breathed hard through white nostrils. Then he gave it thought, nodding his head and smiling to himself.

"Don't want a loose tongue. Don't blame you. But no need to

get spooky. I'm pulling for you. Impersonating him takes real daring."

I autographed the tab.

"You'll forge ahead, all right," he said when it was safe. "How'd you learn his signature?"

"It's on one of those plaques on the Sunset Boulevard wall of Earl Carroll's. I snapped it and practiced copying."

"Neat. Only catch is, he has a special signature for checks."

"I didn't know that."

"I hope you're planning to clear before the checks don't?"

I made a sheepish face and nodded.

"How much you figure to take them for?"

"If I can build a real stake at the gaming tables, so much the better. All I really want, though, is enough to foot the bill for changing my face."

"That's rich." He choked on a laugh. "*He* had plastic surgery. Didn't know that either, did you? Might say *he* copied *your* face. And now you're using the likeness to get the dough to change it. That's rich. But look out. If he catches you he'll do it for you. Unless you get him first."

I started to speak.

"Wait," he said dreamily. "I'm writing a scenario." He was having trouble with the longer words. "You familiarize yourself with his ways. Someone who knew him helps you there." He slapped his

chest. "You don't have to learn him inside out. Just present the general outlines of his personality and people will fill in the details themselves. When you're up in the part we bump him off and you're Rick Bishop. If you make any slips they'll say, 'He's tired or tight. He's not himself,' they'll say."

"You're forgetting Janice Fogg," I said. "She'd know."

He nodded smiling.

"You'd be good in the part. You're a quick study. Janice Fogg, Diana Foss—what's in a name? By any name he's got it bad for her. That is, he thinks he has. He never really loved anyone but Rick Bishop. And from all I hear of her they're two of a kind. No, it wouldn't be too hard to engineer a bust-up." Again he choked on a laugh. "Relax," he said. "If my inside matched my outside you'd see me take hold of such grandiose schemes. Instead you see me take my leave—lingering only to ask if you can spare a sawbuck."

I caught a glimpse of the lost eyes in the sly face. I fished in my pocket and handed him a double sawbuck. He raised his eyebrows.

"I'll give you a tip," he said. "I like to earn my money."

"All right," I said smiling. "What's the tip?"

"You make a mistake about the voice." The twenty looked stronger than his billfold. "Rick's voice is higher in person, more of a tenor.

It's the mike that gives it boom."

I grimaced.

"And I thought I had him taken off."

"Main thing, stick to the Rick Bishop grin." Once more he choked on a laugh. "Know why he never smiles the wide open smile?"

"Why?"

"Goes back to the days before he had caps on his teeth."

He was off somewhere dreaming and I was beginning to wonder how I would shake him. But he had taken in more liquid and so he was first to go, giving me a quick searching glance and a jerk of his head in farewell.

The house was kind. When it cleaned you out it gave you cab fare home. I had my fare home, and then some, beginning with hanging the paper on my old friend the twittering manager of the Mockingbird. "I came away without any great amount of ready cash. I wonder if you'd—?" "Certainly, Mr. Bishop." Then I rode way out and covered the places on the Strip, moving back in, all the while searching for one face in the faceless crowd. I allotted an hour to each spot. At the end of the hour I cashed my winnings or autographed my losses and took in the next spot.

Now I was looking at the facade across the way from the Mockingbird. No matter how often the neon stack of chips struggled upward it never piled the winnings any higher. It always flickered out. It

always tried again. I went in.

It was a classy joint. It had two big rooms, in one you did your drinking and in the other you made like Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon.

The crap dealer rolled his snake eyes at me in welcome without a break in the rattling on of his voice.

"Fever in the south without a doctor. . . . The little lady shoots. . . . Coming out now. . . . The dice are romancing, folks, they're running in pairs. . . . Seven, two; you're all through. . . ."

I searched the faces. Fever was right. Fear and hope burned in all the eyes. Someone once told me that lots of times the fear and the hope in their eyes aren't what you think—or even what they think. He said that, lots of times, the fear is fear of winning and the hope is hope of losing. I laughed at him then. I'm not laughing now.

The little lady's escort was trying to steer her away from the table. Unladylike language streamed from filmdom's sweetest face. The escort shrugged sharp tailoring and took some of the green stuffing out of his wallet. The little lady gave him a ladylike kiss and with caliper-like fingers reached for the bills.

Long red tapped long green as she waited for the dice to come around to her again. She gazed about with a fixed sweet smile. Her eyes lit up meeting mine.

"Rick honey!"

Long red beckoned. I started to nod smiling. I stopped.

The crowd had thinned out and I could see across the room a woman at the lineup of one-armed bandits.

I forgot the little lady until I heard behind my back as I moved away from the table a dry "Well!"

I waded through carpeting. Lighting a cigarette gave me an excuse to stop. Curiosity gave me an excuse to linger. I stood watching the woman.

She was the only person giving the machines a play. She was using up a trayful of nickels, mechanically feeding, levering, waiting. Her straps kept slipping and baring her plump white shoulders, but her hands had become more part of the machine, functioning in answer to its needs, then part of her.

Off to one side a big man was supporting the wall. He had the look of bouncer, his face a road going back to hijacking days.

I took in the woman. Strands of very blonde hair kept falling down in front and she kept tossing her head back. This shifted her harlequin glasses slightly and she reset them by contorting her brows and nose. Her face looked tear-logged and under her eyes were bruises of sleepless nights. She had a generous mouth, full lips that needed no running over with the lipstick but got it all the same. The glow of gambling heightened her own color and caked her makeup.

The big man came away from the wall. It remained standing. He stopped at my right shoulder. He jerked a thumb confident as though flipping a coin with two heads. He spoke out of the side of his mouth without looking at me.

"I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea about her. She's no pick-up. She comes in here every night, plays that one machine a couple hours, goes home. She's a nice quiet dame and this here's a nice quiet joint."

His voice was warm but his eyes had the glint of broken glass on a stone wall.

"Know her name?" I asked.

It suddenly became worth his while to really look at me. He recognized the face and his own face changed. It became warmer, but the voice grew colder trying to keep from showing surprise at my taking an interest in her when I could just about take my pick.

"Her name's Jones. Mrs. Ada Jones."

With an earthquake shrug he went back to supporting the wall.

I took up a station next to the woman. She took no notice. I whipped off my dark glasses and shoved them behind my show handkerchief. I began to feed my machine. I didn't really get caught up in it but when the woman hit the jackpot it brought me up with a shock.

"Hey!" I said.

She looked up with a smile and

bent her head to her winnings. Almost at once she looked up again, gasping, her eyes showing a lot of white. One hand shot up to brush back her hair and the other took off her glasses and dropped them in her handbag. Both hands were trembling. Then her eyes narrowed a bit and the panic went out of her. But she pressed her hands against her breast and she remained pale under the make-up—her mouth a bright smear and the circles of rouge on her cheeks like a clown's and the bruises under her eyes darker.

"Hey!" I said smiling. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's frightening," she said with a catchy little laugh. She stared at me. "You know you look almost exactly like Rick Bishop?"

"Almost?" I laughed. "I am Rick Bishop," I said kindly.

Her face hardened.

"What are you trying to pull? You're not Rick Bishop."

"Maybe you'd better put your glasses back on," I said and grinned the Rick Bishop grin.

"My, that's so like Rick," she said softening. She hardened again. "But you're not him."

"I hate to disillusion you, lady," I said running my hand down my body in a dusting motion, "but this is it."

She shook her head with a knowing smile, her eyes on mine.

"All right," I said grinning, "if

it makes you happier to think I'm not—"

I shrugged and turned away. My machine digested a nickel. I pounded a fist against the metal and turned back to her impatiently. She was eyeing me. She still hadn't scooped up all her winnings.

"What makes you so sure I'm not?"

A secret dreaming smile curved her lips.

"I know him."

I made my face solemn but my mouth twisted in a smile. She flushed.

"I *know* him."

"Sure you do," I said soothingly. With a straight face I said, "Now let's see, when's the last time we were out together?"

Her flush deepened. She looked around and then leaned toward me. Her voice was very low but very intense.

"I know him better than anyone else does."

"Only Mrs. Rick Bishop can say that." I grinned. "And you don't look like Diana to me."

Her face went blank. Her voice went toneless.

"Listen," she said, "I know you're not Rick and you know you're not Rick, so let's drop it."

I hesitated, then suddenly held out my hand.

"All right," I said grinning. "You know who I'm not, who aren't you?"

She laughed all at once and took my hand.

"Oh, you're crazy and a liar, but I like you. You're so like him. If it weren't for the eyes—" She remembered her hand, warm and soft in mine, imparted light pressure, and withdrew it. "I'm Ada Jones."

"Lo, Ada. I'm Denis Omrat."

"Hi, Denis." She couldn't take her eyes from my face. She shook her head sharply as if to clear it and said, "Now what *is* this Rick Bishop thing with you?"

I shot a look at the big man shouldering the wall. I pulled an ear lobe.

"Not here."

I sensed a tug of war inside her; something urging her forward—something holding her back. One something won.

"My place?"

She was breathless with fear or hope.

"Fine," I said.

She changed her winnings to paper and we left.

Through a neon veil the moon showed the same old face. Meanwhile, back on earth, the five-star general at the door was waiting to finger us for the hack stand.

"Taxi, sir?"

I looked at Ada questioningly.

"Let's take a bit of a walk down this way first," she said.

I shook my head at the doorman. Dry run, general. I turned back to Ada.

"What's down this way?"

"Secret."

I knew even before it took shape. We stood in front of the theater playing the latest Rick Bishop film and stared up at the tremendous figure of our hero flashing sword and eyes and a hint of teeth. At last Ada took my arm.

"Let's go, Denis."

I touched the statue. Papier-mâché.

"Sorry you can't come, Rick," I said with a mocking bow. I straightened quickly. "What's that you say?" I pretended to listen to the statue. "He says no one invited him."

Ada said laughing, "Any time, Rick." Her face grew grave. "Please do."

I prodded the figure and it nodded, taking her up on it. Ada squeezed my arm.

I flagged a cab. Ada directed the driver. I looked out at the gray-
ing sky and the drabbing lights.

"Denis."

She had to repeat the name several times—the last time so loudly that the driver lifted his eyes to the mirror—before I turned to her. I grinned inquiringly.

Her face shadowed, she drew away from me a bit and said quietly, "I want you to understand I'm very much *Mrs.* Jones."

I grinned ruefully and said, "I understand."

She squeezed my arm.

The cab pulled up. I tipped the

driver handsomely. He took off whistling.

The frame duplex was about to stop keeping up appearances, about to let them fall of their own weight. Ada unlocked her door and ushered me into the presence of ghosts. My feet whispered over ghost of a figure in the carpeting. The walls breathed out ghosts of smells through the ghost of a pattern in the wallpaper.

Ada looked at me closely and smiled. She gave my arm a friendly squeeze.

"You don't have to feel uneasy."

"I'm not uneasy," I said sharply.

She hesitated a moment, casting a curiously shy look at me, then led the way from the hall to the living room and flicked on the lights.

The room shouted Rick Bishop. On the walls, in silver frames, stills of the famous roles. On the bookshelves, ranks of scrapbooks.

I took that in and turned to Ada. I surprised something not for me to see—her heart shining in her eyes. I hid a grin as she veiled her eyes and faced me.

Running my gaze around I said, "What does Mr. Jones think of all this?"

She merely smiled.

"Where *is* Mr. Jones?"

Her smile deepened, but her eyes weren't taking part in it.

"Mystery," she said. "My! Let me get rid of some of the mess."

And she picked up droppings of

clothing from chairs, couch, floor. I took in the room more fully. Lampshades and slipcovers and curtains rose, the atmosphere was theatrical. She moved toward the hall and armful of stuff.

She stopped and said around it, "You take a drop now and than?"

"Now."

She jerked her chin toward a small portable bar and said, "Then make yourself useful while I put these away."

"First where can I—wash up?"

"Head of the stairs."

With a piece of pink toilet paper I opened the medicine cabinet. On the bottom shelf, a bottle of sleeping tablets. Half-full. Or half-empty. I pocketed it.

Ada was out of sight when I came down.

"Hey!"

"In the kitchen. Getting ice."

"Oh." I moved to the bar. I took hold of a collins glass; my left hand hung over an old fashioned glass. "I'm a Bishop's Cooler. What are you?"

"I'm an Old Fashioned girl."

I smiled to myself and began mixing. Ada clinked in. I added the ice and stirred. We here looked at each other. I took a sip and frowned.

"Hey, that's good stuff," she said. "Or did they take me in with a fake label?"

"What?" I said. "No. The stuff's fine. I was only thinking."

"What?"

She patted the couch and I sat beside her.

"I have to leave town tomorrow." I looked at the Venetian shadow ribbing the wall. The wall seemed transparent as laid paper you held to the light. "Today. It's tomorrow now."

Her breathing quickened. She leaned forward.

"Have you heard something? Are you leaving because Rick's coming?"

"No. Far as I know he's off hunting."

She sank back, cater-cornering herself in the act. She took a sip and made a wry face. She studied my face.

"All right. Now tell me why you make like Rick."

I produced a grin.

"A little harmless deception," I said shrugging. "Helps me make time with a pretty girl."

I directed my eyes along her form.

She laughed as if she found that both pleasing and annoying and said, "No, really."

"Really," I said, but I took a deep breath and told her what I had told Joe Little.

Before I finished I had freshened her drink and she had swallowed it. She eyed me with maudlin tenderness.

"You poor boy. Know how you feel. Greasepaint in my veins too."

"I knew it."

"Could you really tell?" She

smiled and reached over to squeeze my arm. "I gave it up when I married—Mr. Jones." She held out her glass quickly. "Stop goldbricking. Make me another. Not so strong this time, though. I'm really feeling that last one."

"Sure," I said grinning.

I made it stronger.

"Now you tell me," I said handing her the drink. "You really know Rick better than anyone else does?"

She pointed with her glass to the shelves.

"Here he is, from the beginning."

I took out a scrapbook and weighed down my lap with it. The cloying smell of yellowing newspaper. A scene from a high school play. My eyes fixed on a boy with a slightly bent nose. He was cheating the camera to show more of his face. I took note of the caption. It identified the boy as Richard B. Jones.

"Aha!" I said. "So you're more than just a fan. He's related to you by marriage."

She nodded slightly with a faint smile.

"Brother-in-law?"

She shook her head.

"Uncle? Nephew?"

She merely smiled.

I turned pages. The poses took on a more professional air. A girl began to appear in most of them. The captions called her Adeline Windsor. I looked from the pic-

tures to Ada and back to the pictures.

Ada leaned nearer, placing a hand on my shoulder to steady herself, and bleared at the pictures.

"That's right. That's me. We were in the same two-bit stock company." She took a big swallow. "I had a few years on him. I was able to show him a lot of the ropes."

There were more burry scenes from plays, then a glossy print. A young couple standing in a wedding pose. The boy, nose still askew, had an unsure-cocksure thrust of his whole person. The girl, not beautiful, had a certain pertness and a shining, dancing look. There was no caption. I faced Ada.

"What play is that from?"

She studied me with a strange expression for a long moment.

"Know something funny? I've Rick again. But when I first saw been living for the time I'd see you—and thought you were Rick—it scared me. And when I saw you weren't—it almost relieved me."

"Why's that?"

"I've chaged since that photo. Gone downhill."

"To me you look fine."

"Thanks, darling. Maybe then that was true." She put her glass down and smoothed an imaginary wrinkle in her skirt. "But now, even if I should shed a few pounds—"

"Still true."

"Take a look," she said.

I took a look and grinned approvingly.

"No, really take a look," she said with frightened intensity.

I took a look.

Everyone's eyes saying the same thing. *I am someone else under this face. Don't let appearances fool you. Another person is looking out through these holes in the mask. Younger, stronger, prettier, wittier.*

I set the open book down and took hold of Ada. She trembled in my arms but responded. I held her tighter. She pushed herself away.

"Don't make a mistake," she said. "I'm not kissing you; I'm kissing Rick."

"Story of my life," I said with a crooked smile.

"I shouldn't've done that," she said in a small voice. "What'll you take me for?"

I grinned and pointed to the wedding pose.

"For better or worse."

She stiffened.

"Don't joke about that. That's no play. That's for real."

I widened my grin.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Sure," I said. "I take everything everybody says at face value."

She wasn't listening to me.

"Some day he'll tire of the glitter girls and come back to me."

Tears slid down her cheeks.

"Sure he will," I said soothingly. She focused her eyes on me.

"No, you don't believe me."

"Sure I believe you. I believe you believe it."

She rose and stood shakily.

"I'll show you!"

She wobbled out into the hall and her heels octaved up the steps.

I freshened her drink again. This time I emptied the bottle of sleeping tablets into the glass and muddled them together with the lump of sugar.

It was taking a while. I took down another scrapbook. This one held publicity stills of Rick Bishop films. I gazed a long time at the still in full color of Rick Bishop as Indian chief. I heard heels and slammed the book shut.

She entered slowly, one hand behind her back. She seemed suddenly woozily uneasy.

"What say we drop the whole thing, huh?"

"Sure," I said nodding knowingly.

That took care of her reluctance. Her hand came around with a white blur that slapped my palm.

"Don't you dare look at my birth date," she said reaching for her drink.

A piece of paper licensing one Ada Marguerite Windsbraut and one Richard Bishop Jones to have and to hold.

She shuddered as the drink hit her. She smiled wanly.

"Fine time to ask, but you don't mean Rick any harm?"

"Last thing in my mind."

She looked at her glass thoughtfully.

"The stock company broke up. We married. I waited tables. Rick found work now and then. And then one day no Rick Jones. He cleaned out our joint bank account and disappeared. And then one day Rick Bishop. He was better looking and his publicity gave him a wholly different background. But I knew."

"I'd think you'd hate him." I gestured at the sign of Bishopolatry. "Instead—"

She stared at me in surprise.

"Hate him?" After a moment she said with a bittersweet smile, "He probably thinks so. Because I've been blackmailing him." She took a good swallow. She nodded. "A bigamy rap hangs over him. He married Foss without bothering to divorce me." She took another good swallow. "That's when I got in touch with him." She smiled twistedly. "Lately I've been demanding more and more. More than he can pay."

"That sounds foolish. Why?"

"To make him come to me."

A key scraped all over a backplate and finally found the hole. It turned in the lock. A door screamed open and shut.

"Mr. Evan," she said smiling at the dividing wall. There was a small wedge of liquid in her glass. Her eyes found mine. "There you have it. Now I'm terribly tired. And if you don't mind—"

She reached for the license. Her hand appeared to be parting thick fog. Almost; only a bit longer to wait. I moused the paper away, keeping it just beyond her grasp. She looked so foolishly intent I had to laugh.

Her eyes flew open. They shot to mine. The glass slipped from her hand. She took no notice of its spilling. She pushed herself erect, her eyes never moving from mine. She backed to the shelves, felt volumes, fingered a space. Her eyes left mine and hunted wildly.

She spotted the book of stills on the end table. Getting to it became the one goal of her life. And when she made it, finding the right page became the one goal. And when she made it, she nodded to keep the pictures in focus. Her voice was wooly.

"Couldn't have blue-eyed Indian. Rick had to darken the iris with colored contact lenses." She turned to me. "You—" Her voice faded then came back with new strength of rage. "I hate you! Oh, God, how I hate you!"

What took place then wears a blank face in my mind. I only knew she had to shut up. Mr. Evan next door would hear.

Then I was staring down at her body sprawled out on the couch, her last words ringing in my ears. The body had the look of Ada still, but this was no longer Ada. I looked through the livid lax face, through layers of other Adas, but

there was no pearl, no underlying undying Ada.

I blinked painfully. Time I took the discs from my eyes. I did. My face felt like melting wax.

I looked at her in anger. Why had it taken this turn? Why did she have to spoil the simple death-by-over-dose?

I jumped as the refrigerator came on and set a pot on the stove rattling to its humming. It took me a minute to take hold of myself. In a big pot I burned the license and the early scrapbook and the one with the stills. I toted the ashes upstairs and washed them away in the swirls of the toilet bowl.

On the dresser in the bedroom an open steel box. In it her birth certificate—and a stack of U.S. savings bonds in the names of Ada W. Jones and Richard B. Jones. The bonds began dating from the beginning of her blackmailing. Their value amounted roughly to her blackmailing take. After weighing them for a minute, I burned the bonds. Down the drain.

I went around with a handkerchief taking care to untouch everything I had handled.

Everything Denis had handled. All that would remain of Denis would be a paper trail, the footprints of bouncing checks, and hearsay. The cabby would remember hearing Ada call me Denis. And Joe Little, much as he would like to see Rick Bishop take a fall, would have to come forward and

confirm the existence of Denis; that would be part of the hell of it for him. And Denis's trail would end at the airport. A nondescript nobody that nobody noticed would be the only connecting link to Rick Bishop. And they would find Rick Bishop hunting with his manager, Pete Brill. Brill, with his eye on the buck, would alibi me if I knocked off his mother.

I took a last look around and reached for my sunglasses. My heart seized itself like a fist. I heard whispering. Then a voice said, "Now!"

The door broke open and two men spilled in. Following them, Diana.

A flashbulb went off, then another. Between the blindings I thought I saw a third man, hanging back. A man's face under a shadowing brim. But it melted away quickly, leaving only an impression of something familiar. When I stopped blinking there were just two men. And Diana.

A scene from a comedy in which the newborn Rick Bishop had been a mere extra flashed through my mind. Two different gangs happen to pull the same job at the same time. The leader of Gang A snarls, "This is a stickup!" The leader of Gang B snarls, "Whatcha mean, 'This is a stickup!' *This* is a stickup!"

Diana. Sometimes, as when I looked up from the swimming pool and saw her posing on the

edge with her head against the sky, her eyes and the sky the same blue, there was a strange illusion that I was looking through two holes. Right now her face was a mask of disdain.

"What disgusts me is the cheapness. This dump of a love nest, that passed-out tramp—"

She was taking it big, letting the disdain slip, responding to her own passion, building to a shrill climax, one part of her enjoying her own performance as if it were a scene that would win her an Oscar. She didn't notice that everyone else was silent. And then she saw Ada was dead.

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TO.....
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Every day Ventura worked on Norman's nose and every day the nose got bigger. The bigger the nose got the better were Norm's chances for escaping from the prison.

MR. BIG NOSE

BY
MARTIN SUTO

FOR DAYS they hoarded bread. Everytime they came back from the prison mess there were more crumbs for Ventura to use on the head. Slowly it began to take shape, and the first thing that resembled Norman was the nose. It was long and thin, needle-like. Ventura was the artist. He had a great sense of proportion but Norman thought he carried it too far.

Norman would get sick hear-



ing Ventura's froggy laugh.

"That's quite a nose," Ventura would say, "I think it's what's gonna get you outta here."

Norman lay on his bunk sweating. His heart would hammer. He couldn't take it. One of these days he'd blow his top and slide a shiv into Ventura's sick hide. But the thought of escape calmed him down a bit. Later he'd even laugh it off.

Ventura dragged himself around like a spent buffalo. And at night he'd work awhile on the head while Norman kept watch to head off any surprise inspections.

"What's the matter?" Norman hissed one night. Ventura had tumbled back in his bunk, suppressing a moan. With all his needling he wanted Norman to escape. Norman knew that and the fear that Ventura might not finish the head stabbed him once, twice through the heart.

"Same thing," Ventura muttered, pressing his stomach in agony against the hard mattress. Norman swung lightly in the space between them and put his face close to Ventura's thick corded neck. The odor from Ventura's armpits was strong and pungent. The artist rolled up on his side and rubbed his belly. He screwed up his thick features grotesquely, and jabbed a finger at the cell grating.

"Never mind me," he hissed back. "Get over there!"

Norman pretended to thumb through an old magazine while he

sat in the chair and seesawed back and forth. Across the way was a blank wall he'd been looking at the past five years. Directly below was another tier of cells. There were three tiers. He and Ventura were on the top tier. All he really had to do was listen for the watch, the heavy tread, the same sound that was part of his unending routine. He could tell Walters' feet if the watch was walking down a crowded theater aisle. The thought of a theater brought the outside before his mind and he began to sweat. Behind him Ventura was muttering. "What is it now?" he half snarled without looking up from his magazine.

"We need more bread," Ventura whispered hoarsely.

"I'll bring you a loaf tomorrow," he said gratingly.

"You little ant eater," said Ventura, "I got a good mind to change the shape of this nose before it's too late."

Rage exploded within him, blood pounded against his temples. He swayed before Ventura like a thin, venomous snake.

"Why don't you?" he thrust his face close to Ventura's.

Ventura grinned and swiftly hid the different features in the mattress of his bunk and swept the floor around him with his broad fingers.

"Calm down, kid." He sat on the edge of his bunk. "What's the sense of me tryin' with this in my guts?"

Abruptly Norman retreated. "I give up," he said. "If I don't get out of here soon I'll go out of my mind."

Ventura winked sagely, and tapped his veined temple.

"You'll get out, kid, but you gotta keep your head." He came close and put a hairy hand on the other's knee. A change had come over his dark, rocklike face. Fiercely, he whispered. "You stick to your plan, Norm, and if you do I'll guarantee the rest. If there's no real slip up you'll be out next week. And I got somebody for you to visit."

"Who'm I going to visit?" Norman got up and paced nervously back and forth.

"If you make it to this address, I promise you this guy'll take you outta the country. This is one time you can't afford to laugh, kid, because I'm on the level." He sank to his knees and pounded the floor with his knotted fist. "Oh, what I wouldn't give to be in your shoes, kid!" His voice shook.

He didn't see the contempt in the other's eyes.

"What's this guy's name?" His pale skinny hands fiddled with a cigarette. He wondered what really made him want to spit on this big ape of a guy who was half dead and still going out of his way to help him.

Ventura squeezed his stomach hard with both hands.

"Listen. Inside of a week they'll have me in the infirmary. I'm done.

I know it. A guy named Legget owes me a favor. I mean a big favor. I can't use it myself but I sure as hell can use it for you. I got word to him as soon as we started the plan. You see, kid, you gotta think ahead."

"Sure," Norman said, his knees trembling. "What's this guy's name and how do I know he won't change his mind if and when I get there?"

Ventura rose to his feet, his face dark as midnight. He grabbed the kid by the throat. "Are you listenin'? I said the guy's name is Legget, Neil Legget, and you better not doubt his word or mine, get me?"

If it wasn't for getting out, thought Norman, he would kill this big baboon.

Ventura was shaking. He sat down and put his head in his hands. "I don't know why I bother with 'im," he was saying. Norman thought of the bust of himself that was taking shape out of bread. The blood rushed through his veins suddenly until he felt lightheaded. I'll kill anybody who gets in my way in here, he thought, and when I'm outside there. The idea of being free made him choke with emotion.

Ventura looked up.

"Im sorry," said Norman. "I'm nerved up just thinkin' about it."

Ventura rolled over on his bunk.

"We'll need more bread for tomorrow," he said heavily.

It was lights out then and Nor-

man lay down. He adjusted the headset of his radio and tuned in on some rock 'n roll. The music carried him into the city and he fancied that Ventura had finished modeling the head out of bread and that he had made good his escape in the laundry truck. By the time Walters and the other screws had discovered that the nose sticking up out of the bed cover was made of bread he was miles from Detroit and on his way to rendezvous with Neil Legget whoever he was.

On the day Norman was to hide in the laundry truck the driver reported sick. That meant no delivery in town for the dry wash that day. Norman went back to his cell that night with water in his veins. He stood by his bunk, sweat on his forehead, shaking inwardly. Ventura lay on his bunk, his eyes bright with pain. He was smoking one cigarette after another.

"Don't worry," he said. "You'll be all right tomorrow. Smitty'll be back in the morning. He just didn't feel like drivin' today, I guess."

Norman glared at the artist. He had been primed for the escape, and now that the moment was passed he felt numbness in his spine as if he needed help in walking across the cell or lighting the cigarette.

Ventura groaned. "You gotta expect these things, kid. Nothin' ever runs smooth when it's important. It's like they say about love."

Norman smiled and put his hands together as if throttling a human throat.

"This is for Smitty," he said throatily.

"This job," murmured Ventura dreamily, "this is the best thing I've done in years. Bread'll do it, kid. A little flour, a dash of water and a couple of wires. It's my last official act." His voice boomed louder.

"Shut up!" Norman whispered savagely. He sat on the edge of his bunk, fear, hatred and rage making his heart beat faster until he thought he'd faint. The muscles of his left thumb and left big toe throbbled painfully. It was like a warning. He drew deep breaths to calm himself.

He wanted to fly at Ventura with his scrawny arms and shoulders, to scream, to rant and rave. He was going to escape if it killed him. And when he did he was going to find a gun and use it on anybody who got in his way. He was going to use his head instead of his emotions. He was going to think before he leaped. He was going to be calculating, that's what.

"Okay," he said, "I'll give it another try tomorrow. You sure you're ready with old needlenose?"

Surprised, Ventura gave him a long grin.

"You'll make it, kid," he said. "If I was a bettin' man I'd put all my roll on you."

Norman lay back and folded his arms behind his head. In fifteen

minutes they'd march out to mess and then the long night. He knew he wouldn't sleep a wink. He'd listen to the night sounds, Ventura's snores and groans, and an occasional yelp that cut across the cell block like an animal in distress. He'd sweat and shiver, be confident, shake with fear, all in their turn but he knew that in the morning he'd put the special laundry bag in place and in the early afternoon he'd sneak inside the truck. If he got by the first gate he most likely would make it. If he did and Ventura's art work passed the test he'd be in Detroit and out of it before the alarm. And that was all he'd need to get to Mort Kane's place in Buffalo.

Before he realized what was happening it was morning. He had slept like a baby. His heart leaped in his throat at the sounds of morning. The thunderous stir and shuffle of many feet, the clanging of steel as the switch went down and the mile long grating swung up. Ventura was hanging over his bunk with his mouth slack. Fear swept through Norman like ice water. If Ventura had died during the night he was finished. Stunned he stood over the thick bulk of the artist. Ventura groaned. Norman gripped him by the shoulder. Ventura opened a bloodshot eye and swung to his feet. Sleepily, he brushed the kid's head with his paw. "Use your head," he muttered. Then he grinned. "You got two heads, kid.

Two heads are better than one."

Smitty was back on the job. The others were ribbing him about dogging it the day before. Smitty was cursing the medical profession but it was the usual gripe. Smitty was a trusty with a good record. Norman avoided everybody as much as possible as he usually did on the theory that the less conspicuous he was the less apt he was to be noticed. In the late morning when the men were getting hungry he put his specially made sack in the deepest part of the truck. The sack was a double one with padding between that bulged out here and there like an ordinary filled sack. The only difference was that Norman could fit into it. Once inside he could draw the ropes down, tie a knot, and let the draw ropes out again. And with a knife ready to slit the bag in a hurry, all he had to do was lie still and keep his fingers crossed.

After lunch he had about five minutes alone near the truck. Smitty took his time to pick his teeth and chew the fat. By that time Norman was already inside the sack, his head pounding, the blood screaming through his body. He thought sure he'd collapse before Smitty got in and drove away to the gate. Here the guards usually kept Smitty a couple of minutes for a cursory inspection. Sometimes they kicked a couple of bags. Occasionally they made a thorough inspection and went through the entire truck. Seconds and minutes

seemed like hours. He crouched in the darkness, the distant sound of laughter was muffled in the bag. He waited. He imagined the guards were going through the periodical stiff inspection. He was positive they had dumped a couple of bags on the outside. He heard Smitty swear. He thought it was Smitty. He almost collapsed when a heavy object rammed against him. Through the noise and ringing in his ears, the fog over his eyes, he was dimly aware of being jolted. He revived enough to realize they were running over a smooth paved road. He forced himself to think. How long ago was it that they had hit the highway? But he couldn't think. His lungs seemed about ready to burst. Savagely the knife in his fist was slashing through the burlap. He peered out through the tail-end and saw the highway spinning out in the distance. They were on the outskirts of town. In a matter of minutes they'd be in town. Ventura had said, "If you make it to this address, I promise you Legget will get you out of the country."

Abruptly the fields on the roadside merged into hills with clusters of trees. Smitty was slowing down for a signal light. There was no traffic behind them. Norman eased himself out of the back of the truck and darted into the woods.

The stolen suit was of gray conservative cut and filled out his thin figure. The dark plastic rimmed

glasses he had stolen from the farmhouse fitted the shape of his forehead after bending the frame a bit, and they didn't distort his vision at all. With the small overnight bag he had also taken from the house in the woods he sat calmly beside the salesman in the dark green sedan. The salesman was on his way to New York bypassing Buffalo. He was a cleancut young guy of about thirty-three or four, Norman's age. And he talked incessantly about business. Norman could see he was harmless but he encouraged him to talk about his job, himself, about the state of the world. He didn't want him snapping on the radio if he could help it. He was a good eight hours ahead of the game unless the guards pulled a surprise inspection.

If this salesman didn't get too inquisitive they'd get along. He was fair-haired, almost blond, but better looking than Norman. He was athletic looking. Norman knew he was a cinch with the women. Enviously, he stared at the man's smooth well-proportioned features. Norman wished he had the man's nose.

Once or twice the man glanced at Norman and grinned. Norman gripped the knife in his jacket pocket. By God, if this clown was laughing at him like Ventura he'd shut him up quick. But the fellow had asked him a question. He repeated it.

"I don't know beans about optics

but I guess optometry is a pretty good racket these days. Or am I off the beam on that?"

"Well, it's like everything else," Norman said carefully, "people like the best in what they can buy these days whether it's a house or a car. And then after that they want the looks to go with the product. It's the same, I guess, as what makes a woman shop around for a good-looking guy," he added wistfully. The salesman looked at him curiously for a second. Norman shifted uncomfortably. Now what the hell was wrong with what he had said? He trembled with the urge to order the salesman to stop the car, to put his knife to his throat and watch the fear come into the man's face.

They drove along in silence. Somehow or other the tension mounted until the salesman lit a cigarette and offered Norman one. Norman noticed the watch on the man's wrist for the first time. It was a beauty. One of those platinum affairs with a heavy silver interlocking wristband. He forced himself to look straight ahead at the dark ribbon of road winding continuously ahead of their high beam.

After awhile the salesman began again. This time he not only talked about himself but he managed to insinuate a question now and then. Still Norman sensed the man was not prying. He answered matter of factly. He even dozed off now and then. But he awoke with a start

when the man snapped on the radio. They were almost on the outskirts of the city. The man began to hum and slap his hand against the steering wheel. He switched stations when a rock 'n roll tune started up.

"That stuff slays me," he said. A newscaster came on the air abruptly. It was about Norman. He froze. The driver listened.

When the newscaster came on with his description Norman fingered the knife in his pocket. He withdrew it slightly. His head was pounding. The salesman was shaking his head.

"Pretty clever all the same," he muttered. It was his voice that shook Norman. It was too casual, too conversational. He had been listening to this guy babbling for a long time now and he knew, he just knew that the man was suspicious. He stole a glance at the salesman. The man was staring at him. Norman felt the ice creep up to his knees.

"Don't stare at me," he said. "Don't stare at me like that!"

Norman pulled the knife out. The driver was saved when he put on the brakes throwing Norman off balance. But the knife thrust caught the driver in the hand, and as he tore away from Norman his watch band snapped. He was gone in the darkness before Norman could get out of the car. In the darkness there was only the sound of Norman's hoarse breathing, the

crickets in the hot grass beside the road, the smell of burnt rubber, and the lights of the town up ahead.

Norman leaped back into the car, tires squealing as he gassed the motor. He had to reach Mort Kane's apartment and ditch the car before the salesman could sound an alarm.

Mort Kane was downing a glass of orange juice in the kitchen when Norman peered in. He hadn't slept a wink all night. He must have smoked at least a pack of Mort's cigarettes. Mort had put him up last night and told him not to worry.

He wasn't much to look at with his big paunch and homely face but he had what it takes for a friend in need. In a way he was like Ventura but without the big chump's sarcastic ways.

"Well, good mornin'," Mort said, grinning from ear to ear. "Feelin' better?"

Norman tried to grin. He shook his head.

Mort sat down and lit a cigarette. He pushed a coffee container, some doughnuts, and a can of orange juice towards Norman. His eyes belied his heavy body and vacant face. They were dark, sharp and observant. He sat back in his chair with a sigh, glancing briefly at the electric clock above the small freezer fitted into the wall. The sun poured in through the open window. From six stories below came the muted sound of traffic.

"It's almost twelve," muttered Norman, sipping the hot coffee. He felt his nerves quiver spasmodically in the ends of his toes. He drank the coffee in gulps.

"Plenty of time," said Mort. He crossed his legs. "Stay as long as you want. Nobody knows me in this town, and no busybody bulls'll be around here checkin' on anybody."

Norman shook his head.

"I got to keep movin'. Besides they ever find me here you lose all this, have to start from scratch again."

Mort nodded his head.

"I thought about it. Where you tailin' it?"

"Hartford, maybe," said Norman evasively. He trusted Mort but he didn't have to tell him everything.

Mort blew smoke from his nostrils.

"You're welcome to stay," he said again gently. "What's mine is yours."

Norman grinned gratefully but shook his head.

"That's why I came. Everybody knows Mort Kane's word is good."

"I can get you a buggy," said Mort, "and a little cash. You'll need everything you can get to make it wherever you're headed. I advise you again to lie low. You're hot, kid."

The blood rushed to Norman's toes. He nodded dumbly.

"More coffee?" he croaked.

Mort heaved himself to his feet.

His shoelaces were still half laced. "I'll go out and get some."

"Don't go," said Norman. His lips were stiff and still dry. "When can I leave?" he said feverishly.

"I'll get your car tonight."

"I got to leave this afternoon!"

Mort stared incredulously.

"You don't mean it!"

Norman nodded. He said, "I'll make it." Through a haze he saw and heard Mort. When Mort pulled out a wad of bills and peeled off some large and small he shoved them into his pocket and stood up.

"I gotta lay down for awhile," he said.

After a few minutes Mort went out. When he woke up he was lying on the livingroom rug. He must have fallen off the settee. Mort was still out. He went to the kitchen and fixed himself some cold cuts and a glass of milk. He ate and wandered around the apartment. He was like a caged tiger. He had to get moving. The address Ventura had given was burning in his mind like a burr in his skin. He had to find Legget. The thought of going back to his cell made him sick. He found Mort's liquor cabinet but there was only vermouth and gin. Gin was Mort's drink. Strange a guy like Mort favored gin. He took a glass and poured himself a good slug but couldn't finish it.

He took out the salesman's watch and matched the time on the kitchen clock. It was four o'clock.

The sky was brown in the west and the breeze had shifted. He went to the mirror in the bathroom and looked at himself. He was a little pale but that was all. He combed his hair neatly and adjusted the brown straw hat Mort had brought him. He flicked an ash off the neat blue summer suit he had also gotten from Mort and went down the rear exit of the apartment house stairs.

Confidently he turned onto the thoroughfare a block away from the apartment house and went east. They'd never find him. They'd never get him back there in the gray cell, the stinking laundry. He was free now and he was going to stay free. He walked along alert for any late model car that had an open window, perhaps an ignition key in the switch. He saw one at the curb a little ways beyond a flower shop and short of a tobacco store. He went by, carefully appraising the sidewalk on the way back. A well-dressed redhead with matching pumps and the ripe figure he'd always admired came out of the flower shop and approached. He shied away from the car, giving the woman a heartfelt glance. It was a long time since he had been close enough to a woman to catch the shade of lipstick she wore. Confused and worried now that her eyes never left his face, he glanced away. He thought she'd never pass him at the rate she was walking. He glanced at her again

quickly and the blood froze in his veins. She had an attractive figure but a face that spelled trouble. It was the shape of her mouth that told him. Then he saw her eyes as they came abreast of each other. Somehow or other she recognized him, had seen his face before, heard his description over the air.

She lifted an arm, the deep blue eyes wide with alarm. The wide, red troublemaking lips opened wide to scream. He shoved her between two parked cars before her voice cut the atmosphere, before other pedestrians were even aware of what he had done. She flopped between the cars onto the street and in the path of a quick-moving car. Before bedlam broke loose he was lost in the crowd. He went down an escalator into a department store. His fingers twitched with fright but he didn't lose time. Before he found an exit he saw himself in a mirror near a cosmetics counter and in the middle of countless milling women. Only his hat and suit were ordinary. His face was paper white, sharp as a knife, the nose long and thin and accentuating the gaunt cheeks. His stomach curled at the reflection and he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to break the image.

Blocks away from the store he saw what he wanted and drove away. It was a neat, late model black sedan. His gorge rose at the woman. She had got what she deserved. But it was cutting it too

thin. Mort was right. He should have waited until dark. But the urge in him to get to Legget was stronger than any sane judgment. If they got him now he'd be lucky if they put him back in his old cell. For he had seen the expression on the woman's face when the car had struck. He stepped on the gas as if to put distance between him and the image. He didn't have too far to go but it might be wise to ditch the car before he came close to Providence. If he could hide out one night in Jimmy Sills place he had a very good chance of seeing Legget.

He stayed away from the main road as much as possible. When it got dark he cruised along at a fair speed, keeping his eye on the traffic. When he hit the turnpike he could decide whether to ditch the car or take his chances. If he kept on and his luck held he'd make the outskirts of Providence by eight o'clock. It would be a cinch to surprise Jimmy Sills—if he was still in business. His confidence bloomed. He snapped on the radio. A bulletin on himself interrupted the flow of dinner music. He hung limply over the wheel. He could count on a road block every twenty-five to fifty miles. At the first exit he turned into a back road. He was lucky he knew this neck of the woods. But he knew he might have to ditch the car. He cursed the woman who had recognized him.

It was after midnight when Jimmy Sills answered the knock on his door. "It's Norman," he said, backing to one side and closing the door. He didn't seem surprised. Only the suave thin moustache twitched. That was a habit with Jimmy. The last time Norman had seen him he was working the department stores. He always had a good wardrobe and a perfectly convincing manner.

Norman looked into the living-room expecting to see somebody but Jimmy was alone. Jimmy was in his bathrobe, a quality item by the looks of it. He had a brandy glass in Norman's hand before Norman sat down.

Jimmy flicked off the console television and snapped on another floor lamp. The pale blue pastel walls flared into brightness. Jimmy sat on a footstool and sipped his drink waiting for Norman to talk. As Norman talked he seemed to communicate his fears and tension to Jimmy Sills whose dark eyes began to flicker back and forth uneasily.

Norman sat up abruptly. "I'm hot, Jimmy. Hot."

Jimmy poured more brandy. He stood up. He walked into the tiny kitchen. Norman heard the freezer door open and shut softly. He was closer to his goal than ever but he wanted to smash things, ease the tautness of his nerves. Suddenly he was famished. He went into the kitchenette expecting to see food

on the table. Instead he saw Jimmy's hand an inch away from the telephone that hung from the wall nearest the window. There was a quick grin on Jimmy's slick dark face.

"There's ham, bread. Help yourself," he said glibly, too quickly. "How 'bout another drink, Norman. Calm your nerves."

Norman screamed, choked over his words. Jimmy Sills retreated, sweat beads suddenly lining his face.

"You rotten yellow stooliel!" Norman screamed. Jimmy rushed him suddenly before he could slip the knife out of his pocket. Jimmy's rush bowled him back against the cabinets lining the wall. As he whirled his eye caught a heavy ship's wheel ashtray on the portable waiter.

Jimmy had him by the throat now. He was panting, "You got this thing all wrong, Norman!" But he was squeezing Norman's throat harder and harder until Norman brought the ashtray down on his head. Jimmy relaxed his hold a bit and Norman hit him again. He was staggering back against the table when Norman smashed him again below the ear.

Cursing through his teeth Norman went through Jimmy Sill's pockets. In his dressing gown he found only cigarettes. In his pants pockets some small change. In his bedroom he found his suit clothes. In a leather wallet he found a wad

of bills, and in a dresser a small black pistol. When he went back to the kitchenette Jimmy was stirring and shaking his head. Norman kicked him in the stomach.

"The boys'll hear about this," he said. He took the knife out of his pocket again, weighed it, put it back. He wasn't sure after all if Jimmy had ratted on him. It could wait. He went out quietly, down the rear exit stairs.

The smell of the sea came in a faint wave to Norman's nostrils. He had waited until night to enter the house from the terraced windows. A heady atmosphere enveloped him until, for a moment, he forgot who he was and why he had come. The room was long, panelled in dark wood, and obviously the library. He sat in a richly upholstered chair and glanced rigidly around him. Even in the gloom he was able to pick out the ghostly volumes on the shelves, the portable liquor cabinet, the lamps, drapes, all a wealthy man's appurtenances.

He sucked in a little breath of envy, his fear laying heavily beneath it. He glanced at the luminous dial of the wristwatch he had ripped from the wrist of the salesman. The raw struggle to get where he was now hit him with sudden force and he sat sweating and twitching in the chair, lean blond head, thin shoulders in the rumpled blue suit, lean legs, all but obliterated in the gloom.

During the night he thought he heard a ringing and he jumped to his feet, the squat pistol in his hand. He sat down again with a sigh, his heart beating less rapidly. The ringing was in his mind. He fished around for an ashtray. Ventura came to his mind's retina and he twitched painfully in the stillness. Ventura was rasping, "A guy named Legget owes me a favor."

Rubber-legged, he stretched out his legs. He thought of Jimmy Sills and grinned with tight lips. After leaving Jimmy he had been forced to spend a day and a night cooped up on the third floor of a condemned house. That had been a hell-hole with rats running over his hands and neck, and the smell of garbage from the torn up kitchen. And more than anything else was the height. The rain coming in through the smashed windows hadn't helped either. Maybe it was that or everything put together that had driven him half-crazy. Once again he saw himself slipping from one empty room to the other, suddenly ducking behind a door as somebody stepped into the desolate corridor. Whoever he was he had no business there, poking around with a flashlight. He remembered with a chill the faceless, shadowy bulk of the man unconsciously stalking him from one room to the other. And finally the startled grunt as the flashlight beam struck him accidentally across the face. Norman had barely time to dodge, sidestep,

the man's bull-like rush towards him. He had gone over the windowsill like a stone, hadn't even screamed before the sound of a sickening thud told the story. He had been ready to leave the abandoned house about that time anyway. Somebody was bound to spot a vagrant and report him even in that neighborhood.

Somehow he hadn't been surprised at first sight of the Legget estate. He had been in such places before but not as a guest. He wondered for the first time what Ventura had done to make this man grateful. Whatever it was it was more important now to find out whether Ventura was right about him or not. He wished he knew the odds.

A slight breeze from the garden swept serenely into the room. Expectantly, he half-turned toward the door as a tiny sound, a vibration, infringing on the area of his conscious mind made him stand. The door opened quietly and admitted a shadow of substantial proportions.

"No lights," said Norman. He let the air out of his lungs slowly, alert for sound rather than sight.

"Hello. You're here." The man's voice was smooth, well-modulated. Norman heard his own voice plop hoarsely in the atmosphere like a spent bullet.

"I made it," he said, trembling. "Ventura thought I might."

"I am surprised," said the voice,

rasping a bit at the edges now.

Norman gripped the gun tighter, suddenly terrified. How was he to know when this man decided to go back on his word? The voice said, as if to calm his fears, "I intend to leave here in approximately thirty minutes. My launch is ready and we pull up anchor as soon as we get aboard. Any discovery from then on in is your affair."

Norman straightened with eager relief. The sheer joy of it made the blood leap through him. Freedom! His brain sang.

"Whatever you say," he managed.

"There's food in the servant's wing," said his unseen host, "You can change your gear when you get aboard." He added, "You don't have to worry about bumping into anyone."

"You don't like to do this," said Norman suddenly.

"No, I don't," said the voice, matter of factly, "But I don't care to discuss it."

"My friends never ask for small favors," said Norman.

"Your friend was never anything but a fool but I understand perfectly."

You better, thought Norman, but his gun wavered and shook a trifle. Some men would do anything to repay a debt. He guessed this Neil Legget was that type. He wondered where Ventura had met him. For a second curiosity stirred in his mind again. Questions trembled on

his lips, then died. What did it matter? His thoughts leaped ahead, and in his mind's eye he saw the sea stretching out to every horizon. He even told himself at that moment that he loved the sea. Ordinarily, he couldn't stand the water. He used to get seasick on the ferry, and he had never learned to swim.

Legget was saying in a thicker voice, "Okay. We'll get started soon as we can then." His voice faded. There was the sound of a door again and he was gone. Norman waved the gun viciously in the gloom. He didn't trust the man, he didn't trust anybody. He hadn't come this far to make a fool mistake. If Legget wasn't on the level, he'd find it out soon enough.

He fumbled for the liquor cabinet and found a bottle. It was beautiful brandy, like velvet. This Legget seemed to have everything. He was taking another swig when there was a click at the door and the strategically placed lighting fixtures flared on. In an incredibly fast movement he was at the door with the gun in his fist. He saw the woman at the same instant she spoke. "Come along," she said, crooking a finger at him. A diamond sparkled from her finger.

Norman gripped her shoulder, feeling the soft flesh, smelling the heady perfume that came in soft waves from her skin. She was a slim blonde in gold slacks and sweater that strained at her breasts. Her skin was pure white, her eyes green.

Her nose was delicately formed. Only her lips were thickish, overly lipsticked, sensuous.

His breath came sharply, nevertheless he flung her away.

"Who are you?" he said savagely. No woman was going to spoil his chance of getting away. A man loomed up suddenly behind her. He was big around the shoulders with grizzled hair clipped short. His face was tanned and lined by the sea and the sun. It was Legget. His voice was furious.

"I told you to stay in the car!"

The girl shrugged, and pouted. "I'm tired of waiting." She walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured a drink. Norman's heart hammered. He stepped back to keep her in view.

He glared at Legget.

"What's this all about?"

Legget shrugged. His short laugh was light, pleasant.

"Just a family quarrel," he said. "Let's go."

Norman brought the gun up. He didn't like Legget now and he didn't think he'd ever get to like him. He didn't like the way he smiled or the half-stony way his eyes noted things. Maybe he'd be better off if he forgot Legget, Ventura, the payoff, everything. Even Jimmy Sills had tried to turn him over. And how did he know that Mort Kane hadn't gone out to put the finger on him? His suspicions made his head whirl.

"You'd better put that away,"

said Legget impatiently. The girl was surveying him with a glass in one hand and the other nail-lacquered hand on hip. With half an eye he could see she was dangerous.

"I'm Myra," she said with a tease in her voice.

"And I just love sea voyages. Do you?"

Sugar wouldn't melt in her mouth, he thought.

"Put it away!" repeated Legget sharply, staring at the gun in Norman's hand. He held out his hand. It was as steady as a rock. The blood rushed to Norman's head. He put the gun in his pocket.

"I'm ready," he said, staring Legget in the eye.

Legget shrugged and walked angrily out. Norman eyed the girl. She sauntered casually past. He sneered. Her fingers snaked up to the wall switch and flicked it off. For a moment she was close to him in the semi-darkness of the foyer in the huge livingroom. His pulse leaped. He gave her a light shove.

"Move!" he muttered.

She staggered, kept moving. She whirled away.

"Now, Neil!" she screamed.

Norman made a desperate lunge sideways but he was too late to catch Legget in his sight. He felt rather than heard the fluid blasts from the gun in Legget's hand. For a moment he didn't realize he was face down in the thick carpet. When he did he flopped over on his back, arching his legs up to ease the pain. It was then that he was aware of Legget bending over him as if to study the shape of his nose. This time he wasn't even remotely insulted.

He heard Legget say, "Imagine that ape Ventura sending out one of his pals to see me! Well, whatever he knows it won't do him any good now."

Norman coughed through the searing shadows in his chest. It was a peculiar thing how he wanted to laugh at Ventura now. Even Legget and the girl. But suddenly fear of the sea swept over him.

A subscription to MANHUNT insures you of 128 pages of exciting and baffling mystery reading 6 times a year. See page 45.

TIE SCORE

Nausea flooded over Morry; a haze swirled before his eyes. Blindly he brought the brick crashing down over the girl's bobbing head.

BY
**CARROLL
MAYERS**



Morry wasn't much for girls, the way Slick was. Slick could meet a strange doll and make the pickup, smooth and simple. Morry couldn't. Whenever he tried, he broke out in a cold sweat, particularly if the babe was really luscious. Sometimes, Morry imagined the chick was openly laughing at his flat, freckled face and puny body, and that made it worse. He didn't have Slick's sleek dark looks or lithe build, but still he wanted to score with the girls.

Like that honey blonde in Logan's Bar.

The night it happened, Morry and Slick were bumming about aimlessly. None of the gang was at

the pool hall or hanging around the movie, so they drifted into the bar for a couple of beers Logan would provide if the crowd looked okay. They took a rear booth. Somebody'd left a couple of comic books in the booth and they started reading, killing time, nursing the beers. An hour went by, maybe more. Then Slick nudged Morry, grinning.

"There you are, pal. Just your type."

"Huh?"

"The blonde, up front."

Morry followed Slick's gaze, laid down the comics. The girl was perched on a stool near the door, toying with a Jack Rose, and even from forty feet Morry recognized something special. Slim, nylon-sheathed legs, carelessly crossed. Svelte hips and thrusting figure made doubly provocative by a tight black dress. Full, glistening lips.

Morry whistled softly. "Nice. Real nice."

Slick chuckled, repeated, "Just your type."

Morry's lived with Slick's needling. Usually, he managed to shrug it off, resigned. But tonight, Slick bugged him.

"Check." Morry said shortly.

Slick laughed at Morry's earnestness. "So pick her up."

Morry was ogling the blonde. *Man, what a figure!* His palms began to sweat; he wiped them on his pants. "You think I can't?" he mut-

tered, goaded by Slick's derision.

"I know you can't, pal."

Color flooded Morry's thin face; he shoved himself from the booth, chest tight. Two bucks, two lousy bucks were all he had, but that was enough. Maybe he couldn't really pick up the chick for the evening, but he could buy her a couple of drinks. He'd show Slick—

The stool next to the blonde was vacant. Morry slid onto it, striving to appear casual, yet acutely conscious of the girl's proximity, her intimate woman-scent.

Morry balled his fists. He was only seventeen and this chick was older than any of the debts in the gang—maybe even twenty—but he suddenly wanted to talk to her so bad he could taste it. He had to score.

Morry faced the blonde, managing an uncertain smile. He was sweating and he stammered when he spoke, but he got the words out. "C-can I buy you a drink?"

The girl didn't smile—she laughed. A short, throaty laugh as she flicked Morry a scornful glance, idly adjusting her over-the-shoulder bag.

"Get lost, kid."

"B-but—"

"I said, get lost." The blonde went back to her drink.

Morry's armpits were icy, his temples pounding. He wanted to slap the girl sprawling. The barkeep was scowling, a couple of patrons tense. Morry gritted his teeth,

slid from the stool, went back to the booth.

Slick was grinning broadly. "I told you."

Morry slumped in his seat, lips twitching.

"Relax." Slick's grin died as he suddenly grew sober. "You didn't stand a chance; the chick's working the dough boys."

"Working?"

"I've been watching her," Slick said. "The past hour she's left here twice with johns looking like they had plenty of green. She's probably got a pad in the neighborhood."

Morry shot a hot glance at the blonde. "Cheap tramp," he said.

Slick shook his head. "Maybe not so cheap. We could find out."

"Huh?"

"That bag wouldn't be hard to grab, pal."

Morry's eyes widened. "You mean—?"

"With those rich johns, she's probably collected plenty," Slick said. "We could tail her when she leaves with her next pickup, wait until she starts back alone..."

"Jeez, Slick, I don't know—"

Slick eyed Morry shrewdly. "We could even get some smooching for kicks."

Morry's palms were moist again. That sounded good. All he'd wanted was to buy the babe a drink or two, make a little time—and she'd laughed at him, called him a kid...

Morry drew a deep breath.

"Whatever you say," he said tightly. "You call it."

But a quarter hour later, when the blonde left the bar with a paunchy, middle-aged character and Slick nudged him sharply, Morry wasn't so sure. Snatching the chick's purse was one thing, but mugging her was another. Even though her cold rebuff still stung, thought of hurting her suddenly sickened him.

Morry tried to hold back as Slick prodded him. "S-suppose she screams?"

"You chicken all of a sudden, pal?"

Morry swallowed hard, followed Slick from the bar. Nobody called him chicken.

They didn't have far to go. On the street, the blonde and her john walked two blocks, turned in at a cheap hotel. A half-block behind, Slick grunted with satisfaction, halted at the mouth of a dingy, rubble-strewn alleyway. "Perfect." He sidled into the alley. "If she yells or tries to hang onto the bag, belt her—good. Once either of us gets it, cut out, split up. We'll meet back at Logan's."

Morry nodded silently, miserably. He didn't really want any part of this. But it was too late now.

Slick's glance was sharp. "Quit worrying. This'll be a snap. She'll be back in twenty minutes."

He was right. Peering around the alley wall, Morry saw the paunchy character leave the hotel, disappear

up the street. A few moments later, the blonde emerged, started back toward them.

"Get set," Slick muttered.

Morry was trembling, his heart thudding against his ribs. Suppose she did scream and he had to hit her...?

And then Morry's mind locked because the blonde was abreast of them and Slick leaped out, clamping one hand over her lips while he grabbed for her bag with the other, wrestling her into the alley.

She fought frantically. As Slick pulled her about, she wrenched her mouth free, started to cry out. Slick hit her in the throat and she gagged, slumped against the wall. Slick hit her again, fumbled for the bag, but she clung to the strap, kicked at his shins desperately.

"Get—the—bag!"

Morry bulled in, snatching at the bag, but the strap had fouled around the blonde's arm and he couldn't break it. Slick slapped her viciously and she reeled, then collapsed. Off balance, Slick went down with her. The blonde's legs threshed wildly, skirt riding high, as they rolled over the littered paving. The bag skittered clear. Then the girl's nails raked Slick's cheek and he cried aloud, beating at her face.

"Hit her! Hit her!"

Nausea flooded Morry; a haze swirled before his eyes. He had to do it! Blindly, he groped for a brick in the alley's rubble, hunched over the blonde's bobbing head. His stomach retched violently as he swung. Once. Twice. Then he dropped the brick, grabbed the bag and ran . . .

Music on the radio at Logan's Bar faded as an announcer spoke. ". . . bring you a local newflash. Police have discovered a homicide in an alley off Third Street . . ."

Back in the rear booth, Morry clenched his fists. The blonde had raked Slick's face and he'd've really beaten her, thudded his heavy boots into her young body.

". . . the corpse, that of a youth about seventeen with skull crushed by a paving brick, has not been further identified."

Morry licked dry lips. The blonde wouldn't return to Logan's tonight, perhaps not tomorrow, but she'd come back some night. He'd taken eighty-five dollars from her bag before he'd thrown it down a sewer, and when he flashed a roll like that at her, maybe she wouldn't laugh. Maybe then she'd let him go with her and he could kiss those glistening lips and pull her to him.

Morry began to sweat again. What a score that would be . . .

The intruder moved stealthily from room to room, golden shafts of moonlight glittered along the barrel of his automatic. He entered the bedroom soundlessly, his eyes devouring the couple sleeping.



AWAKE TO FEAR

BY ROBERT CAMP

BENJAMIN CONDOS finally fell asleep, unaware of what the next few hours would bring. The steamy August night blanketed his slumbering body in a humid mass of heavy air. Angela, his wife of twenty-seven, tossed fitfully, and

then was still. Ben, lean and athletic at thirty-five, stirred slightly and slept on.

In the rear of the sprawling, rejuvenated farm-house, Bruno Garth gripped the moist butt of the Luger in his right hand as he raised the

window screen with infinite care. Tensely, he waited for some sign that he had been heard. Seconds ticked by, and then he swiftly eased his stocky body over the window sill and crouched behind a convenient chair. Satisfied that his entry was still undetected, he carefully crossed the inky-black den—and after a momentary pause at the door—stole rapidly down the hall, peering into each darkened room as he went.

In the master bedroom, Ben Condos slept heavily, unaware of the shadowy figure that had just halted in the doorway. Outside, the hot breeze sighed softly through the drooping willows that lined the drive—the sibilant whisper lulling Ben more deeply asleep. Noiselessly, Garth glided towards the slumbering figures in the antique four-poster bed.

“Wake up!”

The half-growled command penetrated Ben’s sleep-fogged mind as merely a vague noise. Groggily, he fought his way to consciousness—his dulled eyes probing aimlessly around the room—searching for the source of disturbance. His annoyed brain tried to fit the noise into a labeled slot—failed—and then with sudden clarity his mind’s eye saw the *voice*, and he snapped erect in bed.

“Freezel!”

Ben’s heart pounded against his ribs. His brow popped beads of perspiration, and his throat drained

dry. A cold finger stabbed into his stomach as a thin shaft of blue-white moonlight reflected dully from a Luger as Garth’s thick-fingered hand thrust the gun under his nose.

For the first time since that chaotic gray dawn in Belgium, Ben was struck immobile by fear. Only this time it was more than the somehow impersonal death-dance of armies—it was desperately real and terrifyingly personal. This time he did not have a coldly comforting M-1 to make him the relative equal of each ghostly, gray-clad figure that had flitted through the shell-demolished forest. This time he was weaponless — defenseless save for his two bare hands.

Ben stared at the faintly wavering barrel of the automatic with the morbid fascination of the tourist for a fakir’s cobra. Angela Condos stirred slightly in her sleep, and Ben eased his right hand over to comfortingly stroke the satiny curve of her hip. With a shock, Ben realized that Angela was only partially covered. She was sleeping nude in feeble opposition to the sultry August air, and Ben drew the limp sheet completely over her almost luminous whiteness. Indignation blended with the fear now, and Ben glared through the gloom at the ominous, black shadow.

“Real touchin’,” the voice grated sarcastically, “now wake her up.”

Gently, Ben shook Angela’s bare shoulder. In her somnolent state,

she resisted the insistent prodding of his hand. Finally, she moaned softly and half-opened her eyes.

"Darling, what on earth . . .," her voice trailed off into silence. Ben heard her whistling intake of breath as she became aware of the figure crouched next to the bed. Quickly, Ben gripped her arm to forestall any instinctive cry of alarm. The scream died unvoiced as Angela choked back her terror and clutched Ben's arm.

"Ben—who—who is it? What does he want?" Her voice rose tremulously to almost a whine as she was shaken by an involuntary shudder of fear.

Nerves strumming with repressed anger, Ben beat down a rising surge of violence and spoke to the threatening figure.

"What in hell is going on? Who are you—how did you get into this house?"

"I'm Bruno Garth—if it makes any difference to you!"

"Garth! Ben, he's . . . he's wanted by the State Police," gasped Angela.

Vaguely, Ben remembered the half-heard telecast being interrupted by a news bulletin about a liquor store robbery. The usually unemotional voice of the local announcer had been stammeringly excited about the shooting of a Highway Patrolman who had apparently attempted to arrest the hold-up man.

"That's right baby, I blasted a

stupid cop last night. Guess I didn't do too good a job though—he lived long enough to tell them who it was."

"Garth," Ben blurted out suddenly, "my keys are on the dresser. Take my car, and you can probably make the state line. I promise not to call the . . ."

Garth ramméd the Luger forward until its muzzle was centered between Ben's eyes. For one terrifying moment, Ben thought he was about to die. He felt his stomach contract and his knees quivered in a reflex of utter fear. For what seemed an interminable time, Ben Condos and Bruno Garth fought a desperate, silent battle of wills. Suddenly, a new hysterical sob from Angela split the stillness of the room. Perceptibly, the tension eased but the automatic remained pointed at Ben's head.

"Listen jerk," rasped Garth, "don't push me—I've been pushed too much already—so don't get me teed-off or I'll send you where that cop went. I'll leave when I'm good and ready. Cops are just waiting for me to run, but they're gonna wait a helluva long while before they get ol' Bruno."

"All right, Garth," Ben said, "but just remem . . ."

"Shut your damned mouth," roared Garth, "and keep it shut—get off my back or I'll kill ya! Unnerstand?"

Ben, firmly convinced now that there was probably only a thin line

of reason shielding him and Angela from death, nodded assent. He drew the faintly sobbing Angela to his side and patted her shoulder with a reassurance he did not feel. Slowly, the threatening weapon was withdrawn.

Ben searched the murky depths of the room—stabbing the darkness separating him from Garth with a hate-filled glare. All his instincts and half-forgotten military training twitched at his muscles to act.

Angela trembling from the threat presented by the shadowy figure, raised teared eyes to Ben's face.

"Ben," she said in a faintly quavering contralto.

Her voice was so dissimilar to her normal tones, that Ben looked at her anxiously, fearing for the moment that she was on the verge of hysteria. For several seconds, their eyes locked in the wan light, and then wavered apart.

Ben breathed an almost inaudible sigh. His real chance to end this madness, the thing that could equalize the imbalance of the situation, was far beyond his reach. The delicately engraved 12-gauge Browning Angela had given him last Christmas was stored away in its sheepskin-lined leather scabbard. *"Even if I could get to it,"* Ben thought, *"couldn't load it fast enough."*

"Easy honey," he said soothingly, "everything is going to be all right—just take it easy."

Angela relaxed a bit—gradually

unwinding the tensions that had twisted and knotted within her. Ben could feel the rigidity drain from the soft curves nestled against his side. It seemed that her body was signaling his that it had regained at least a certain measure of self-control. Ben, relieved by this unspoken message, now devoted his full attention to the hovering menace of Bruno Garth. Unwilling to provoke the man into rash, panic-driven action, Ben decided on a silent campaign of psychology. The seconds ground ponderously into minutes before Garth finally broke the long silence.

"Ya know, I ain't had nothin' to eat since yesterday! How about diggin' up some grub, Romeo? Only remember this, wifey stays here with me so that you don't make no mistakes an' try to be a hero. While you're gone, me an' cutie-pie here will get better acquainted—huh sugar!"

Ben stiffened as the anger swirled back into his system. In a moment however, he relaxed and deliberately eased his long frame from the bed. He was reasonably sure that Garth would do nothing drastic at the moment that would complicate the situation further. He hoped that Garth didn't want to kill again unless absolutely necessary. Once out of bed, Ben slipped on the pajama pants that had been carefully folded on the night stand. Dimly, he remembered a tired joke about pajamas being handy in case

of an emergency. "Well," he thought, "this was as much of an emergency as I ever want."

In the kitchen, Ben mechanically put together three sandwiches by the light from the opened refrigerator. Never a man for snap decisions, Ben mentally cursed his inability to dig out a solution. His main hope seemed to rest in waiting-out Garth rather than attempting to overpower him. Lurking in the shadows of his mind, however, was the paralyzing realization that Garth couldn't just peacefully walk out of their lives—the man had intimated this fact by his enraged refusal of the car. Further, even if Garth went so far as to tie them up, he would be running the risk of one of them slipping the bonds and alerting the Highway Patrol. As shocking as it seemed, Ben felt that Garth had no alternative to violence in one form or another. What would he do? He could beat them unconscious—hoping for at least an hour on the road unmolested, or, he could kill again.

Opening a can of beer, Ben morosely contemplated the sleek deadliness of the racked kitchen knives. Involuntarily, his hand crept toward their honed coldness—but he stopped and left them untouched. Garth appeared to be too alert for anything as theatrical as a hidden knife. Frustration knotted his brow as he realized that even so desperate a move as poisoning the food was out of the question

since all pest-killers had been removed from the pantry at his super-cautious insistence. Stacking the sandwiches in his left hand, Ben picked up the beer can in his right and padded across the kitchen towards the hall. As he passed the humming refrigerator, he kneeed the door shut, and—nerves ajangle—almost dropped the sandwiches when it slammed closed with a hollow *K-ATHUNK*.

Striding almost noiselessly down the hall, Ben's eyes were drawn longingly to the closed door of the closet. The unattainable shotgun seemed to beckon him, and he sighed resignedly at the situation.

As he neared the bedroom, Ben paused. Inhaling deeply, he stepped through the doorway. Although neither Angela nor Garth had moved they had apparently been talking—he could only speculate as to the subject. Angela was still half-reclined in the center of the bed, but her head was averted from the lounging figure of Garth. Ben could see a faint sheen of perspiration beading her forehead, and his brow furrowed as his racing imagination conjured up the lewdness that must have spewed from Garth's lips in his absence. A hot poker of fury seared Ben's stomach, and he started forward angrily.

Instantly, the Luger swiveled and focused on the pit of Ben's stomach. He halted abruptly at the lethal stop sign, and seething within, awaited directions.

"Put the food on the dresser and cool off, Buster."

Ben slowly advanced and placed the sandwiches on the end of the dresser. Furiously, he slammed the beer can down next to the sandwiches and glared at the moon-lit figure.

"Now face the wall and put your hands on top of your head."

Ben complied, seething inwardly with impotent rage, and a moment later felt a hard hand patting the waist band of his pajamas. Deftly, the hand patted its way down each of his legs, and then was suddenly withdrawn.

"Good boy—now ease over onto the bed and be a good boy again while I chow down."

Garth emphasized his meaning with a vicious jab of the Luger into Ben's right kidney. Ben, nearly retching as waves of pain washed through him, turned haltingly and stumbled toward the bed. Garth's mocking laugh buffeted his ears.

"What's the matter hero? Ten minutes ago you were tellin' me not to get rough, and now you're gettin' pushed aroun' like a *li'l kitty-cat*."

Garth's voice increased in its biting sarcasm as he continued to slash at Ben with razor-sharp taunts. Suddenly, he switched his attention to Angela. His voice altered in timbre, and became silky—leering.

"How about it sugar? How do you like your big, strong, lover-boy

now? He's a real hero now ain't he? Until I rapped him one, he was all bite—now he can't even bark. What say sweetheart—wanna give a real man a chance?"

Ben whirled, and started back towards Garth. An almost animal growl started low in his chest and rumbled through his clenched teeth. He had taken one long stride when in the eerie light of the false-dawn filtering through the blinds, he saw something in Garth's yellow-flecked eyes. Ben stopped short—hesitated—and then returned to his place on the bed. Puzzled, he studied the craggy features of Bruno Garth, and then he found his answer. "*Angela — he wants Angela,*" he thought, "*but he doesn't know what to do with me. The conceited ass thinks he can win her away from me!*"

Ben felt his self-confidence returning. In spite of the murderous automatic that seemed to never leave his mid-section, he was almost sure that he now had the edge. He had stumbled on the weak link in this maddening chain of circumstances — indecision. He forced his pounding heart to quiet—now of all times, he knew he had to be cool and wait for his one big chance. Ben searched his brain for a means to throw Garth off balance for the scant second he needed to act. Suddenly, the solution snicked into place like a precision-made bolt—*ANGELA!* What better way to trip-up Garth than by the very ob-

ject of his desire? With a cunning he didn't realize he possessed, Ben Condos devised a plan that might—with luck—succeed.

“Haw!” Garth guffawed, “I tol’ ya he was chicken-hearted, Honey—whaddyasay now?”

Angela sat in stunned silence. She had not devined the weakness within Garth as Ben had. Troubled by the situation, and physically sickened by his obscene propositions, Angela could only stare confusedly at her husband.

In the heightening light, Ben could see the conglomerate emotions that flitted over Angela's face. She looked calmer now, but each time Garth gestured with the Luger or spoke to her she flinched visibly. Garth's proposals had revolted her but she was confused by Ben's apparently timorous attitude. Anxiously, Ben sought to catch her eye during one of her fitful glances in his direction. Failing this, he resigned himself to earnest concentration, and glared fixedly at Garth.

With Ben's apparently cowed retreat, Garth had relaxed perceptibly. Now, with a final scorn-laden look at Ben, he stepped to the dresser and began wolfing down the sandwiches. In between great gulping bites, he sucked greedily at the wedge-shaped puncture in the top of the beer can. For a full five minutes, the only sounds in the tension-charged room were the smacking of Garth's lips and the gurgling slosh of the beer. Finally,

with a stentorian belch, Garth wiped his glistening lips on the sleeve of his sweat-stained shirt.

“Aaaaaahh!” he rumbled, “that I needed. Okay, you two, let's walk quietly into the livin' room where I can relax. You don't have to bother gettin' dressed, Honey—that sheet looks jus' fine.”

Ben, disgusted at the grossly wanton gleam in the man's eyes, slowly got to his feet. Bending towards Angela, he began to wind the sheet protectively around her. Leaning across her, Ben cocked his head slightly and breathed two words from the corner of his mouth.

“Seduce him.”

Straightening, Ben half-lifted Angela from the bed and set her down standing on the small rug. Entirely, he took her right elbow in his left hand and guided her past the smirking Garth toward the hall.

The first weak rays of the new sun greeted them as they entered the living room. The golden shafts probed through the angled blinds, and slowly washed the murky grayness into dull gold. Ben carefully detached himself from Angela's side and slouched dejectedly two paces away. Feigning hopelessness, he stared at the thick carpet between his bare feet. He studiously avoided looking directly at Angela, but she never left his peripheral vision. With mounting tension, he waited for Garth to close the dis-

tance between them. Angela slowly turned until she was facing the oncoming Garth. With deliberate carelessness, she allowed the shielding folds of the sheet to slip from her left shoulder.

Garth, striding into the room with surprising grace, stopped abruptly at the milky-white revelation. His eyes flicked nervously from Ben to the soft roundness of Angela's shoulder. He sidled towards Angela—never taking his eyes from Ben's profile—until he was three feet from her. For two long minutes, Garth suspiciously studied Ben's features. Then, apparently convinced that Ben had been stripped of his former belligerence, he turned towards Angela.

Still uncertain, Garth eased closer. His tongue nervously flicked over his heavy lips. Still wary, he eased his left hand toward Angela until his fingertips were touching her shoulder. He probed her eyes with his, and, encouraged by her lack of dissent, slowly began to tug at the voluminous gathers of the sheet. Little by little, the sari-like covering loosened until with a faint rustle, it fell away from the left side of Angela's body. Garth sucked in his breath in an audible gasp at the sight of the woman's nakedness. Hungrily, his eyes raked the full length of her body.

"Do . . . do you still want me?" her voice hissed out in a hoarse, caressing whisper.

Garth, misinterpreting her slight

trembling for awakened passion, stared at her, slack-jawed. Hopefully—incredulously—he devoured her with his eyes. His breath was beginning to shorten, and as his imagination soared into licentious visions, he continually wet his lips until a thin rivulet of spittle traced its way from the corner of his mouth.

Suddenly, Angela shrugged her right shoulder and the remaining folds of the sheet slithered to the floor. She stood immobile—as if on a pedestal of crumpled sheet. Her naked body seemed to glow in the early morning sunlight, and Garth's eyes burned as her beauty goaded his passion to new heights. With all the sensuous lure of a practiced courtesan, Angela arched her body towards him.

Ben, watching the sensual play unfold and then reach a peak of suspense, exerted every ounce of self-control to remain unmoved. A grimace-like smile was etched across Angela's face, and Ben could see the terrible strain begin to wear through the facade of invitation. Ben's eyes flicked to Garth's face, and he became almost physically sick at the sight. "*Not much longer—only a little bit longer!*"

Lust overthrew reason, and Garth, growling unintelligibly, lunged forward. The Luger sagged loosely from his slack fingers—apparently forgotten.

Ben hurled his body sideways in a low, driving shoulder block. His

right shoulder slammed savagely into the soft flesh just under Garth's rib cage, and the clawing fingers of his left hand clamped with a bear-trap grip around the wrist of Garth's gun hand. Garth's breath erupted in an explosive grunt as he was driven off his feet by the force of Ben's rush. The Luger roared defiantly as Garth jerked the trigger in spasmodic fury. Angela screamed as steel-jacketed death whined past her and thudded into the wall beyond. Still screaming, she scuttled away from the threshing bodies.

Viciously, Ben drove both knees for the groin as he landed on Garth. His momentum had carried him too far and he felt the crippling dual thrusts land ineffectually on Garth's muscle-padded thigh. In desperation he snapped his head forward and was rewarded by a sodden *plop* as Garth's nose splintered. Blood spurted as if from a pressure hose.

Roaring obscenities, Garth whipped his left elbow at Ben's head, and cursed when the blow skidded off the frontal bone missing the thinly shielded temple. Blinded with pain and choking on his own blood, Garth strained to angle the Luger towards Ben. Inexorably, the gaping bore shuddered around—steadied—and then belched flame and thunder.

Ben shrieked as his left shoulder and neck were seared by burning

powder and fiery gasses. Maddened by rage and pain, he mercilessly smashed his left knee into Garth's exposed groin. With a triumphant cry, he pistoned the knee up and down three more times, reveling in each jarring thump and resultant screech of agony. Garth's screams only spurred him on, and he coupled two more crushing pumps of his knee with chopping right-hand smashes to Garth's temple. The writhing body beneath him shuddered once convulsively, and then was still. Ben hesitated uncertainly, then snatched the Luger from Garth's limp fingers. With grim determination, he clubbed the blood-spattered head just above the left ear with the knurled butt of the automatic.

Exhausted, Ben slumped across the still quivering body of the unconscious Garth. Through the bayonets of pain stabbing his neck and shoulder, he heard Angela screaming hysterically. Dully, he raised his head and called to her, but she was oblivious to anything except her suddenly released emotions.

Grunting with pain, Ben got to his knees, and then wavered erect. Nostrils twitching at the acrid bite of cordite that hung stagnant through the room, he swayed unsteadily towards his wife. He shook her trembling shoulders.

Angela finally responded, and her screams faded into racking sobs as she lifted her face to his.

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IT WAS late spring. The Southern California season had ended only the week before but the afternoon was hot. The prowler car from the sheriff's sub-station drove slowly down the beach road. It passed Point of Rocks, and a few miles farther south pulled off the road at the foot of Martinez Canyon.

It parked there, facing the highway and partly hidden by a concrete bridge, in a position to observe traffic approaching from three directions. Cars came south from the sub-station and Point of Rocks, north from Palisades City, and from straight ahead down the winding canyon road. The location was



ONE HOUR LATE

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The young girl down by the beach was going to mean a lot of trouble to the little community. She attracted men the way honey attracts flies. The problem was which man was going to murder her.

a good one, from the point of view of the two deputies in the car. The shopping center on the far side of the road was a traffic focal point.

The parking spot had further advantages for one of the deputies, the man who sat erectly on the right. He was dark and good-looking, and his black eyes stared expectantly at the small cafe next to the supermarket. His name was Tommy Riggs. The big round face of the other deputy, the one who sat behind the wheel, was placidly expressionless. His name was Earl Bingham, and he didn't have the driving curiosity that Tommy had. Some people, and Tommy was among them, believed that when Earl was physically awake he was still half-asleep.

They sat there for twenty minutes, from two-thirty until ten minutes to three, and all that time Tommy watched the cafe. Customers came and went, but whoever or whatever he was waiting for did not appear. He gave an irritated glance at the Swiss cigarette lighter Earl was playing with, and turned his attention to the row of beach houses on his right.

There were fifteen or twenty of these, built close together in a straggling line along the road. The nearest was about twenty yards away. Tommy knew the weather-beaten, wooden house. It had recently been bought by a man named Warren, who had divided it into two apartments, one above the other. Warren

lived in the lower level and rented the upper half to an artist and his wife. From where he sat, Tommy could see the upper bedroom window. The same look of irritation he had given the cigarette lighter crossed his face. He disliked and disapproved of artists. Tommy disapproved of any man, for that matter, who apparently had to work less hard than he did. He shifted his position, looked past the house down at the beach. He muttered an exclamation and leaned forward, watching the couple on the sand.

There's no law forbidding a man and girl to make love in public, within reasonable limits. But when the man is married and at least thirty-five, and the girl a year or two below the age of consent—well, a thing like that, it makes a guy's blood boil. Tommy said so, in anger and disgust.

"What do you mean?"

"You saw those two down there!"

Earl nodded. "He kissed her. What you mean, it makes your blood boil?"

Tommy, intent on what was happening delayed his answer. The man trotted across the sand and disappeared around a corner of the Warren house. The girl waited for a moment, then sauntered after him. She, too, disappeared, and Tommy turned back to stare at the cafe.

"I mean it makes you sick."

"Why?"

"You saw what happened. She's

just a kid. You know what's happening right now?"

Earl thought about it. He nodded doubtfully. "I guess so," he said.

But he guessed wrong. What had actually happened and what was happening at the present moment, was not at all as Tommy had imagined. It was ten minutes before three. The motivation of the scene the deputies had just witnessed was only slightly tinged by sex, and it had no sexual outcome. Its beginnings lay in nothing more serious than a restlessness that had come over Dave Russell thirty-five minutes before . . .

At two-fifteen Dave had taken a half-hour break. The decision to knock off was not reached easily. He had to talk himself into it. He wasn't satisfied with the way his work was going. The magazine cover he was doing had a posed quality, lacking life.

He left his drawing board and went out on a narrow exterior stairway that climbed to the porch behind the kitchen. The porch was on a level with the beach road and, beyond it, he could see fast, thick traffic. This part of the beach was getting to be as cluttered as a business street in town.

He got his swimming trunks from the clothesline and turned back to the stairs. These descended to his own door, and then continued down to a sandy enclosure

that served as both patio and front porch to the lower half of the duplex. The lower half was where Lu Warren—now that his wife, Amy, had gone home on a visit—lived alone. Dave went down the steps, his right shoulder brushing the side of the house, his left hand on the banister. If he had raised his hand he could have touched the wall of a similar but empty house next door. He returned to the living room to peel off his paint-smearred sweatshirt and khaki trousers.

After his swim, he would hang the trunks on the line exactly as they had been before. They would be dry when his wife came home at six; Helen need not know that he had taken time off from his work. The only think lost would be a little more of his self-respect—which, it seemed to him, was already wearing pretty thin. Helen had made more money in the past year than he had.

This slump was not entirely Dave's own fault. The market for his stuff had been unsettled by the easy popularity of TV. These things happen, and invariably adjust themselves in time. In time Dave also would adjust to changing conditions, but meanwhile his ebbing confidence was beginning to affect his work. He would gladly have taken a job, any job, except for the fact that his painting was the only thing that might pull them out of their present hole.

In a way, it was too bad that this was so. A job, if it accomplished nothing more, would at least have returned them to an equal, companionable level. Formerly they had swum together. Now Helen worked while he swam alone, and concealed the evidence of his loafing. It was an unpleasant, furtive situation all around.

Dressed for the beach, he wound a towel around his neck and frowned at the hand still holding it by one end. It was a strong hand with long, thirt fingers. His fingers were as skillful as they had ever been. They had mastered their techniques so thoroughly that they could work without conscious direction from his mind. And there was certainly nothing the matter with his mind. His tanned body was well-muscled, he was thirty-four years old and married to an attractive woman with whom he was in love. He had been a successful commercial artist for thirteen years. This was a period during which he should have been turning out the best work of his life, and he was doing nothing of the kind. He shrugged, and went to take a swim.

Barefoot, Dave ran down the rest of the wooden steps to the sandy enclosure at the bottom. He started across it to the beach, and stopped. A girl was blocking the way, sprawled out in a deck chair. She looked as though she were about sixteen. Her short blonde hair was

so light that it was almost silver. She wore a tight, black strapless swimming suit, and stared up at him with sullen but curiously beautiful gray eyes.

The french windows at the far end of the patio were open, but this was Friday and Dave knew that his landlord was not at home. Lu worked at an aircraft plant inland and about ten miles away. The girl was probably a young friend of his wife.

Dave nodded, waiting for her to move her legs. They were stretched across the only gap in the low concrete wall. She did not move.

"Hi," she said.

Dave smiled. "Didn't know anyone was here."

She shrugged. "I'm here. All of me—two hands, two feet, ten fingers and ten toes." She wriggled them. "Got nothing else to do so I just finished counting 'em. You going someplace?"

"For a swim."

"I can't swim. Not much swimmin' where I come from," she said.

Her voice and diction were straight out of the Ozarks—nasal, high and slurred. Lucius and Amy Warren had both come from Western Arkansas. The connection established itself in his mind as he waited for her to let him pass.

She continued to study him, lying motionless in the deck chair. He said, "Pardon, please," stepped across her outstretched legs and went out on the sand.

The tide was on the ebb. The waves had left behind them a small embankment about two feet high. He dropped his towel on the embankment and sat beside it, his feet on the wet sand. He did not know the girl had followed him until she appeared from behind and sat down at his side.

"Like the beach?" she asked. "I can't get used to the fishy way it smells."

She carried a bulging beach bag from which she was taking a pack of cigarettes. "Hey," she said. "It's okay. I'm a sort of cousin of Lu Warren's. Thelma. You're that artist, ain't you? Got a match?"

He shook his head.

"Never mind. I got one here." She found a box of matches and lit her cigarette.

There was no shade, and the hot sun had only declined slightly. Already there was a light film of perspiration on Dave's skin, but Thelma seemed unaffected by the heat. She sat on her heels, slender legs folded lithely underneath her, leaning back for balance on her right hand and arm. Her left forefinger drew concentric circles on the sand, but her gray eyes did not follow the motions of her finger. They rested fixedly on him. He noticed that the sullenness had left them. It had been replaced by an expression he found difficult to define. Her eyes were interested. They contained a hint of calculation, but this was overbalanced by a wistful qual-

ity. More than anything else, they were alive and aware of their aliveness. Her slightly parted lips disclosed good teeth. She had a short, straight nose with nostrils that pulsed in rhythm with her breathing. Her body was fully developed. There was a vaccination scar high on her right leg.

Dave got up quickly. "Think I'll take a dip," he said.

The wave broke as he plunged into it. The cool salt water buoyed him up to greenish light. He was facing seaward when his head broke surface, and he dived again to swim beneath a second wave. The ocean was relatively calm next time he came up. The backward toss of his head was unnecessary and done from force of habit; it had been years since he had worn his hair long enough to have it wash across his eyes. He swam straight out, and presently swerved to look back at the beach.

Thelma sat where he had left her. She was rummaging in her bag again, and had the settled appearance of a person who had found a place that suits her and intends to stay. His self-allotted thirty minute break was nearly up, and he swam back slowly. She rose and carried his towel to him as he waded through the surf.

"You swim good," she said.

"Thanks." He saw that she was holding a pencil and a large pad of paper, evidently taken from her bag. "Writing letters?"

She shook her head. "Who'd I write to, and who'd bother to read my letter if I did? Got nothing and nobody. An hour late and a dollar short, that's me." She held out the pad with simulated coyness. "Draw my picture . . . Dave?"

He did not want to. That little pause before she spoke his name, and the soft way in which she'd drawn it out into two syllables, making it sound like "Day-yuv," warned him off. But he had learned that it often consumes less time to grant a small favor than to frame a plausible excuse.

"Okay." He accepted the pad and pencil, and wound the towel around his neck. "Sit down."

"Here? What's the matter with your studio?"

"I don't have a studio."

She sat down, disappointed. "Thought your wife was out."

"She is. Look straight at me. Now turn your head a little to the left." Dave sketched with rapid competence. The girl was stiff, too conscious of the fact that he was studying her as a subject rather than as a female. In an effort to relax her, "When did you come to California?" he asked.

"Six months ago." She was thinking about herself now, and her face was animated. "But I just run into Lu last week. Lucky thing I did. I was working at the five-and-ten in Palisades City. I'd just got fired when he come ambling in."

"Why'd you get fired?"

"Well, they didn't exactly get a chance to fire me. I beat 'em to it. You know something? You're sort of cute," she said.

She was leaning forward, looking straight into his eyes. Dave, susceptible to her expression as a man, accepted it whole-heartedly as an artist. Something happened to his fingers. They took on independent life. He finished the rough sketch, put his initials at the bottom and handed her the pad.

"Portrait of a promising young girl," he said.

She examined the sketch and got up very slowly. But her breathing was rapid and color tinged her cheeks. "Hey," she said in a low, wondering tone, "it's me, all right. It's the way I really am." Before he could guess what she intended, she ran forward, threw her arms around him and kissed him wetly on the lips. "Gee, thanks!"

Dave disentangled himself. "Glad you like it." He went away from her, trotting across the sand. He crossed the little patio, ran up the stairs. Without pausing to shower or dress, he went directly to his drawing board. He had recaptured something down there on the beach; it was a feeling he had mislaid what seemed a long, long time before. He wanted to get it down in line and color before it slipped away. If it did slip away. Maybe this time he would be able to hang on to it.

After he had gone, Thelma stood

for a quarter of a minute, looking at the flight of stairs he had just climbed. Then she followed him as far as the patio, and went through the french windows into the lower section of the house.

But, of course, the two deputies in the prowler car got a totally different impression. And that impression gave rise to an idea in the deviously working mind of Riggs . . .

Anything that Tommy said or did was perfectly okay with Earl. He knew that he was—well, say inexperienced; and he admired his partner. Tommy had taught him practically everything he knew about his job. There were lots of little extras to be made; the trick was to make them without getting caught. Little by little, just by keeping his ears open, Earl was catching on. When Tommy told him to stop clicking his lighter, he stopped doing it. "Going to get this fixed tonight," he said, and put it in his pocket. When Tommy said the blonde girl was jail-bait, and that a guy who'd take advantage of her like that ought to be jugged, Earl nodded in slow agreement.

"She's beautiful." He pronounced it *beauty-full*, reaching forward to turn on the ignition.

"The guy's one of these artists. Probably got a dozen models running after him. You and me, we get what's left." Tommy spat

through the open window. "Where you going?"

Earl had started the motor. "Been an hour since we went down to the pier. Figure we got time for one more round. Okay, Tommy?"

"You're driving. Suit yourself."

The prowler car eased into the southbound traffic. Tommy studied the Warren house as they drove past. There was parking room for three cars beside a gate that opened on a flight of wooden steps. Near the gate was a small porch on a level with the road. A kitchen window opened on the porch, but it was screened. Tommy tried, but it was impossible to see inside.

They turned around at the pier, completing the southern leg of their tour, and were back at the foot of the canyon by three-thirty. There was still time for a trip to Point of Rocks before knocking off for the day. Tommy grunted affirmatively when Earl glanced at him. Ten minutes later Earl swung the car in a U-turn and parked off the road.

Tommy opened the car door and got out. The high tide had left ankle-deep pools of water on the beach fifty feet below. Children played in the pools, watched by their sun-bathing parents. A zig-zag path, starting at his feet, led down to where the children were. Beyond them was the gray mass of Point of Rocks, a pile of jagged boulders stretching out into the sea. A few fishermen had climbed out

to the end. They sat stolidly on uncomfortable bare rock, exposed to sun and wind. Tommy was exasperated by a patience he could not understand. The poor morons would sit there all day long, and make a big production of it if they caught so much as a single fish—a fish that could, when you counted in the cost of their tackle, time and transportation, be got a lot cheaper in the market. It just went to prove what he had always known: that people, taken as a whole, were pretty stupid. A smart operator could always make out without breaking his back or even trying very hard.

The idea which had been churning in his mind this past half-hour took recognizable form and floated to the surface. There was a chance that cradle-snatching artist might be parted from a few coarse bills. But it would have to be worked smoothly, if it was worked at all, and the layout would have to be well cased first. Tommy grinned. Maybe he could talk the girl into co-operating. An investigation under such circumstances might turn out to be fun. Like Earl had said, the little blonde was beauty-full.

He turned to the right, looked north along the wide curve of the bay at the little settlement where the sub-station was located. The cluster of buildings was similar to the one at the foot of Martinez Canyon. There was a post office next to the sub-station, a grocery

store, a restaurant and cocktail lounge, a service station. About a dozen houses were on the hill above the settlement. Tommy, since he had split up with his wife, lived in a rented room in one of these. The road north of Point of Rocks was relatively new. It had been chipped out of the palisades only six years before, and was shorter by ten miles than the old road winding inland over the mountains. There was no beach. The new road ran high above sea-pounded rocks.

Earl called diffidently, "How's about it, Tommy? Getting late."

Tommy got back in the car. They reached Martinez Canyon at quarter to four, fifteen minutes before the end of their shift. Earl parked on the beach side of the highway, as he always did, and Tommy resumed his alert surveillance of the cafe. Above the door of the cafe a sign, bright green on a white background, read, *MILDRED'S PLACE. GOOD EATS.* On the plate-glass window in frosted letters had been written, *TRUCKERS WELCOME.* Two trucks and an ice cream wagon had stopped in front of it. The ice cream man was doing a good business selling to people from the beach.

A woman came to the door of the cafe. Wiping her hands on her apron, she blinked at the declining sun. She was about thirty-five, a year or two younger than Tommy, and she was well-built and had

good, regular features. Once she had been pretty, but her freshness was all gone. Her neat brown hair was gathered at the nape of her neck and tied with a ribbon, but the dull colored ribbon was strictly for utility. She looked harrassed, and continuous worry had burned deep lines in her face.

Earl cleared his throat. "There's Mildred."

"Blow the horn."

The horn blared out. The woman shielded her eyes against the sun and turned toward the sound. Tommy waved. She looked directly at him and, without acknowledging his salutation, went back inside. The afternoon was still warm, but she closed the door.

Tommy chuckled. "She'll be sorry."

"You hadn't ought to treat her that way, Tommy. She's sort of nice."

"You married to her, or am I?"

"You are. I just—"

"You just shut up. I'll treat her any way I like."

Mildred walked through the opening in the counter, past the two truck drivers who were having early dinners, and went into the kitchen. Hazel, her white-haired helper, was busy at the stove. Hazel glanced at her as she walked silently to the window and sat down in a chair. From the window she could see the supermarket, Manny's

beer joint and a good stretch of the highway, but nothing she saw stirred her interest. A person walking a tight-rope doesn't pay much attention to the scenery. She's got all she can do to keep her balance and stay alive.

"What's the matter, honey?" Hazel asked. "Feeling punk?"

"I'll be all right."

"You'll get over it. You always feel punk every time you get a letter from the kid."

Ralph's letters arrived regularly once a week. One was like a carbon copy of another. He never complained. Complaints would have been edited by the reform school censor. On the other hand, he never really told her anything. "I'm well and hope you are the same . . . Nothing much to say except I wish I was home . . . They treat me pretty good . . . Your loving son." He never mentioned Tom Riggs. Not even when Mildred had written that she and Tom had separated and that she was considering a divorce. Ralph utterly rejected his stepfather. That's possible when hundreds of miles separate you from the person you reject. It's not so easy when every day you have to see, and sometimes talk to, the man you hate more than anything on earth.

Familiar sounds came in from the front. The cash register rang, the truckers slammed the door as they went out, a couple came in and ordered hamburgers and cans

of beer. Mildred started to get up but Hazel said, "I got it, hon," and she sat down again. Hazel was nice. On days like this she did more than her fair share of the work.

There was a lull when no customers entered the cafe. Hazel came into the kitchen, stood beside her. She looked out the window, too. She said, "There's Lu Warren's cousin-or-whatever-she-is. Like to know what Amy thinks about her staying in the house. Going to the market." Hazel gasped audibly. "Well, I'll be—!"

The blonde girl, dressed in sandals, white shorts and a pink halter, had not been headed for the market. Passing the beer joint, she had suddenly turned in.

Hazel was indignant. "Got a mind to tell Lu Warren, just to see him burn!"

"It's not a saloon," Mildred said quietly. "Manny doesn't sell hard liquor. You drink beer yourself."

"There's a world of difference between sixteen and sixty, dearie. And she ain't a day older than sixteen."

Three-quarters of an hour went by. More customers arrived and left. Hazel took care of them. Mildred remained in her chair. Once she made an effort to rise, but sank back again. She felt incapable of movement, drained. But her mind was active, surveying her problem from every conceivable angle, and from every angle meeting the same high, barricaded wall. She did not

see Thelma come out of Manny's place, but she probably would not have noticed if she had.

The front door was opened briskly and Tom Rigg's voice boomed through the cafe. "Mildred here?"

Hazel didn't answer. Mildred heard approaching footsteps. Then a moist hand was rested heavily on her shoulder.

"Hi."

She sat rigidly. "Take your hand off me, Tom. I don't want you to touch me, and I don't want you in my kitchen."

"Baby, why don't you give in?" He burlesqued a noisy sigh. "You know you're crazy for me. Why don't you break down and tell me so?"

But when she swung around to face him, he jerked his hand away. He went over to the ice box and got a can of beer. She studied him as he punctured it and drank.

He still held a physical fascination for her, and she despised herself for feeling it. He was shallow, cheap and cruel, but he was also strikingly handsome. One of his ancestors had been an Indian; it showed in his slightly Oriental features, his dark coloring and black hair. He had changed from his uniform at the sub-station. In slacks and a loud sports shirt, he looked like what he had been before he'd joined the force: a salesman on a used car lot. A good but disappointed salesman. Tommy had been able to move jalopies as fast

as anybody in the trade, but every time he tried his hand on new cars—especially expensive ones—he failed to make it. People who bought Lincolns, Cadillac and Jags seemed to prefer a subtler form of pressure. They shied away from overbearing charm.

Mildred saw his amused eyes watching her above the tilted beer can. She stared back at him. "What're you doing here? You got anything to say, you can tell it to my lawyer."

"Hell with lawyers. You're my wife. Man's got a right to come in his own place."

"I'm not your wife. This restaurant belongs to me."

"We're still married. This is a community property state." He finished his can and tossed it in the wire receptacle beside the sink. "This is the day you're supposed to hear from Ralph. Get a letter?"

"Yes."

"They treating him all right?"

"He says so."

"You got me to thank for it. I got friends up there."

"You want me to thank you for something, Tom? Get out and don't come back."

He shrugged. "Of course, if you don't want him treated right I might be able to arrange that, too."

Mildred got up slowly. "You'd like to do that, wouldn't you? You've always hated Ralph."

"Now, hold on—!" A flush crept from the collar of Tommy's shirt

to spread across his face. "I did everything I could to help that punk. He was guilty—"

"Of what? He didn't even know that car was stolen." She walked toward him with purposeful, unnerving deliberation. "Guilty of trying to protect himself after you'd run the car off the road and killed his friend?" Her right hand dipped into her apron pocket. "Ralph never owned a switchblade in his life."

Tommy had backed up against the sink. He watched her pocket. "You gone crazy, woman?"

Hazel's head came through the open service panel. "Mildred, you okay?"

"I'm okay. Everything's okay." Mildred's hand was no longer hidden in her apron. Hazel glared at Tommy, withdrew her head.

"Like mother, like son. Screwy." Tommy edged away from the sink, went over to the window. "Switchblades! Getting so it ain't safe for a man to open his mouth."

"You're safe," Mildred told him. "You'll stay safe just as long as your friends are good to Ralph."

He grinned, his confidence restored. "You want that, why don't you try being nice to me? You ought to see my new room, Milly. Got a color TV, twenty-one inch. Private entrance, too. Feel like a short drive up the coast?"

"I don't feel like a drive of any kind with you."

"You will, one of these days.

Can't hold out forever, baby. Let's have another beer."

Mildred got a can from the ice box punched it and held it out to him. But Tommy was no longer interested. Suddenly he had become intent on something on the far side of the window. Mildred looked past his shoulder. She saw the blonde girl, Lu Warren's cousin, standing in front of Manny's. Thelma was a little drunk. She was talking to Dave Russell, smirking and swishing herself around in a way she probably thought was cute.

Mr. Russell seemed to be listening politely, but he only took it for about twenty seconds. Then he went into the supermarket. Thelma wrinkled her nose as she turned toward the beach road. She was evidently going home.

Mildred was still holding out the can. "Take your beer, Tom. I got to go to work."

Tommy didn't take the can. He turned from the window, crossed quickly to the ice box, slipped out a six-pack and hurried from the kitchen. He acted like a man with something on his mind. Mildred didn't ask him what it was. She was too glad to see him go.

But a moment later, when she saw his yellow convertible turn into the beach road, she nodded as though she'd known that he was up to something of the kind. And didn't care.

"Hazel, you want a can of beer?" she called.

A girl's got to have her kicks. Beer's okay but it wears off fast, and a girl is left feeling even lower than she was before. With nothing to do but sit on the beach and nothing to look at but the crazy ocean, and nothing to look forward to but Lu coming home and preaching at her like he was a shouting Holy Roller trying to get her to repent.

Give a girl a chance. First let me do something to be repentful for, Thelma told herself as she walked home. She giggled. I'll be as repentful later on as right now I'm full of beer.

It wasn't easy walking alongside the road. There were all kinds of little hills and hollows. Her feet kept climbing up on one and slipping down into the other and once she sort of lost her balance just before she reached the gate. She was leaning against the gate when she saw the yellow convertible. It must have sneaked up on her; it was standing only a couple of feet away. A man was grinning at her from behind the wheel.

"Hi, honey. Want a lift?" he said.

He was good-looking. Not the way Dave Russell was. You had to study Dave close before you realized he was as good-looking a fellow as you could ever hope to meet. This fellow's crazy looks reached out and sort of slapped you in the eye.

"Don't need a lift," she told

him. "I'm already home."

His teeth, set against the darkness of his face, were white as skimmed milk. The wider he grinned, the whiter his teeth got. "Home's a place to come back to. How're you going to come back if you don't go places first?"

"Now if that ain't just what I was thinking! Mister, it's the awful, lousy truth. You take me places?"

"I'll take you, honey, and bring you back again. Climb in."

Thelma climbed in. There was a cold six-pack on the seat. She lifted it to her lap. The car swung in a U-turn, drove past the super-market, turned right into the canyon road.

"There's an opener in the glove compartment," the good-looking fellow said. "My name's Tommy. What's your pretty name?"

On this particular late afternoon, Dave Russell for a change did not resent the fact that, in a sense, he was doing his wife's work while his wife did his. The painting promised to turn out even better than he'd hoped. He was like a man who, having risked his last quarter on a slot-machine, unexpectedly lines up the three jackpot symbols. Running into Thelma a second time had not especially disturbed him. He was sorry about what was happening to her, as he would have been sorry to see rust forming on a piece of gleaming,

well designed equipment. But, after all, he did not own the equipment. It was not his business if she let herself grow up to be a tramp.

He wheeled his groceries to the cashier's desk. They were whisked from the bag and put into a paper sack. He peered through the glass door before carrying the sack outside. Thelma was not in sight. He was on the sidewalk before he remembered that he hadn't bought dessert.

The ice cream man was getting ready to move on. Dave caught him as he closed the side-panel of his truck.

"Pint of chocolate, please." In surprise, he added, "Well, hello! When did you take on this job?"

It was Ken Hurley, a young man who had formerly worked in the service station. He and his wife lived about six houses south of the Warrens' place.

"Do it every year, soon as the warm weather starts. Pump gas during the winter months."

Dave paid him for the ice cream. "Like it?"

"Why not? Keeps me outside and not too far from home."

He slammed the side-panel, got into the driver's seat. He raised his hand in casual salute, let in the clutch. As the truck rolled away it automatically began to play a tinkling little tune. Dave smiled, listening. It was good advertising, that particular nostalgic number. It brought back memories of child-

hood. He hummed it, crossing toward the house. *Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?* It made him think of long, hot summer days—and cold ice cream.

He went through the gate and down the steps, entered the living room and carried the groceries to the kitchen. The house was built in a manner conforming to the steep hillside; in order to get to the kitchen, he had to climb another flight of narrow stairs. He set the groceries on the sink, put the ice cream in the refrigerator and glanced through the screened window at his trunks hanging on the line. They were quite dry now. On impulse he returned to the living room and placed his almost finished picture where Helen would be sure to see it as she came in. She would like it. He told himself the pleasant things she would say about it, and went back to the kitchen where he made preliminary preparations for dinner. He was an indifferent cook, but Helen more than made up for his lack of skill. She always put the finishing touches on their meals.

A few minutes later he heard their Rambler come to a stop beyond the window. He saw the car door open, and returned to the living room. Helen seemed unusually slow coming down the stairs. He opened the front door, stepped out and called.

"Need any help?"

Helen smiled, but it was a tired

smile. Her left hand rested on the banister. "I'm a little beat. Hard day at the shop and the traffic's tough."

Dave felt quick concern. He climbed to take her hand. It was an extremely feminine hand but he sensed resistance in it, as he had sensed resistance in many of Helen's reactions during the past few months. He let go immediately, a little hurt.

But that, he knew, was behaving immaturely. When a man's wife comes home tired he doesn't, or shouldn't, sulk. He held the door open, turned back with a smile.

"Little surprise for you," he said.

Helen entered the living room. She hesitated when she saw the picture. Dave shut the door.

"Well—like it?"

"It's good," she said, with no particular enthusiasm. "Quite good. Mind if I rest a few minutes? Then I'll fix dinner. I have to work tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Saturday!"

"Maybe it'll only be for a few hours in the morning. I'm lucky Victor doesn't have me working Sundays, too."

She walked to the little stairway that mounted to their bedroom. Dave lifted his hand uncertainly as though to stop her. But he let her go.

Helen resisted an impulse to slam the bedroom door. She eased it

shut, crossed to the dressing table and grimly inspected her reflection in the mirror. It had happened, as she had known it would happen the first time Dave caught sight of that little blonde girl from downstairs. Helen had only seen her once herself, the night before when they'd passed each other on the outside staircase. But even that small encounter had been enough to put her on her guard. There are females who regard all marriages other than their own as personal challenges; their own they usually regard as unavoidable inconveniences. Thelma—that was the name Lu Warren had used when he had called her from below—was one of these. Okay, Helen could accept that. What she could not accept was the fact that Dave—who was *her* husband!—had proved himself to be in no way different from any other husband, any other man. Susceptible? He could not possibly have met that predatory child before this very morning—and already he had painted her portrait, had the damn thing nearly finished!

Helen went to the closet, got out a pair of white silk lounging pajamas and dropped them on the bed. She started taking off her clothes. She was a smart woman, in several senses of the word. She dressed smartly; as buyer for a woman's shop, that was an essential part of her business. She was beautiful, but she was also clever. It was

her cleverness that she would have to call on now. Thelma might have her teen-age freshness and resiliency, but she—Helen reminded herself—had experience, self-control and brains.

Furthermore, it was entirely possible that she was allowing herself to become agitated over a trifle. Dave might have seen in the girl an interesting subject for a picture, nothing more. Very likely, during the course of the evening, he would mention having spoken to her—politely, casually—and having noted her pictorial possibilities. That would be Helen's cue to compliment him, slip him the happy needle, tell him what a really fine job he had done.

Helen sat on the foot of the bed, reached for the pajamas, started to pull them on. With one foot lifted to plunge into the trousers she abruptly paused.

If only the damned picture didn't absolutely reek of sex!

His wife was the only woman Dave had ever known who felt about good, natural things—the sun, the sea, music and the correct proportions of vermouth and gin—as he did, and did not think it incumbent on her to chatter about them. But now, when it came to a critical appraisal of his painting, she was carrying taciturnity too far. "Quite good," she had said. If there was one word he hated, it was that

affected adverb, *Quite*. He sat on the couch and lit a cigarette.

Before he had time to finish it, there were footsteps on the stairs and she was back again. She had changed to white silk pajamas. They set off her brown hair and dark sun tan, and she stood before him in an attitude of amused contrition. Dave frowned, knowing that she was not contrite, but unable even as he frowned to keep from thinking how her long legs and perfect figure could do anything she liked with any kind of clothes.

"Your picture's wonderful, Dave. It's the best thing you've ever done."

Dave got up and kissed her warmly. "Sit down, working woman. I'll fix dinner."

"Oh, no you won't! I'm hungry. Whip up a couple of martinis, if you like."

Getting his mixing implements together, he had an impulse to tell her about Thelma. But he repressed it. He would find a more suitable occasion later on—make a joke of how he had met, and talked to, and drawn a quick sketch of Lu Warren's little cousin on the beach.

But of course he didn't do it. That would have called for an explanation of how he had happened to be on the beach in the first place, an explanation that would in effect have been a semi-apology. He didn't feel that an apology was indicated, and he saw no reason for

ruffling the tranquility of what had turned out to be a pleasant evening. Helen became oddly quiet about ten o'clock, and they went to bed at eleven. It was illogical but Dave, as he undressed, had all the symptoms of a queasy conscience.

It must have been the same symptoms, whatever caused them, that kept him awake. He lay still, waiting first for the little muscular spasm that always signified Helen's "jumping off to sleep," and then he lay still for another three-quarters of an hour, afraid that any movement might awaken her. He grew increasingly tense. He wanted a cigarette, he wanted a drink of water, and these two wants combined to make any immediate prospect of sleep unlikely. At last, with infinite care he slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the living room. He stopped there long enough to light a cigarette, then climbed to the kitchen, not having bothered to turn on the lights.

There was no light in the kitchen, either, but none was necessary. He went unerringly to the sink, felt for and found a glass, turned on the tap. He stood there for a moment, sipping water and discovering that he wasn't thirsty after all and had started back to the living room when he heard a car stop by the gate.

He would have paid no attention if, simultaneously, he had not heard Thelma's petulant, slurred voice.

"Home?" It came blurred

through the window screen, and it was obvious that she was drunk. "Whatcha bring me here for, hon?"

"You change your mind too much." The man's voice was heavy with resentment. "Say you'll go to a motel, then say you won't. Now you can go to bed by yourself."

"See you tomorrow?"

"I'll think about it. Go on, now—scram!"

There was a pause, followed by the sound of a scuffle. A car door slammed. Dave heard the motor accelerate, then fade away. All this happened before the girl began to scream.

"*You* scram! Hear me, you old goat? Scram! Scram . . ." Her anger dwindled as quickly as it had risen. She chuckled, talking softly to herself. "Should of asked Dexter when you had the chance, old goat. He could of told you. Knows all, sees all—sees it in the stars." The gate creaked and Dave moved closer to the window. He looked out.

He could just make out her figure, a shadow darker and more opaque than the shadows that surrounded it. She wavered past the window and beyond his line of vision, but he heard a soft thud as she sat down abruptly on the steps. She started humming to herself.

It was no recognizable tune she hummed, and it was interrupted after only a few seconds by a man who came running up the stairs.

"Drunk!" It was Lu Warren,

whispering furiously. "You get down to bed!"

Thelma laughed. "Whose bed? How you, Cousin Lu?"

"Shut up!" There was a sharp crack; he must have slapped her face. "You're no kin of mine, you little wench!"

Her protest ended in an unintelligible gurgle. It sounded as though Lu had clamped his hand across her mouth. Dave heard her heels thump as he half-dragged, half-carried her down the steps.

She broke loose once and screamed, "Le' me go, you ol' devil! I'll tell Amy—"

He silenced her again. Her heels bumped rapidly for a moment, then there was nothing to be heard except diminished traffic on the road and surf breaking on the beach. Dave let out pent-up breath, grateful that Lu had been able to handle her without awakening Helen. He returned to the living room and was halfway across it, tiptoeing toward the bedroom, when the lights switched on.

Helen stood by the light switch. Her hair was dishevelled but she was wide awake.

"What time is it?"

"About twelve. Sorry you woke up," he said. "Lu Warren had a little trouble with his cousin."

"His what?"

"Girl who seems to be visiting him. Supposed to be a relative but, from what I overheard, could be she isn't. She came home swacked."

"I heard that much," Helen said. "In fact, I heard too much. Why on earth are you up wandering around the house at this hour?"

"I got up to go to the kitchen—"

"This is hardly a time of night to start a long discussion about nothing. Are you coming to bed?"

Dave said huffily, "I don't want to disturb you. I'll stay here on the couch."

"Well, really—!" Helen would have said more, but she caught sight of his expression. She shrugged, switched off the light and climbed the bedroom stairs. Dave stretched out on the couch. It was lumpy and the pillow had been designed for purely decorative purposes. He blamed Helen for what he knew would be a long, uncomfortable night.

In the morning, as usual he awakened first. He dropped his feet to the floor and sat up stiffly. There was a crick in his neck, and he was tempted to let Helen fix her own breakfast for a change. But his better nature joined with his own need for a cup of coffee, and he went to the kitchen to fill the percolator and put it on the stove.

Waiting for the first beige spurtings to turn brown, he reviewed the little tiff. The danger of such a misunderstanding, and even of a serious argument, seemed to be always with them lately. It lay just below the surface, as a shark might swim around and under a small boat. He would have to watch

himself. He didn't know why it should be but, under the present unnatural conditions, responsibility for domestic peace seemed to be all his.

He opened a can of orange juice, poured coffee and arranged a breakfast tray. He braced his shoulders and carried the tray into the bedroom. Helen was still sleeping. But her face looked fresh and rested, and her sleep could not have been very sound. As he placed the tray on the bedside table, her hand reached out and touched his lightly. That was all. No more was necessary. He sat on the bed, handed her the orange juice and watched her fondly as she sipped.

It was a bright morning with a blue sky and no smog, and Dave was interrupted only once. There was a knock on the door about ten-thirty. He opened it, and experienced something like psychic panic when he recognized his visitor. It was Thelma. The girl showed no signs of a hangover. Her bright hair was covered by a red babushka. She wore her strapless swimming suit and had assumed a model's pose—hand on hip, weight on her right leg, left knee forward and slightly bent. Her provocative gray eyes were amazingly innocent.

"Hi, Dave. Going for a swim?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I'm working."

"You hear me when I come in last night?" She grinned. "Up on cloud seven, wasn't I?"

"You were feeling no pain."

"Maybe no, but that crazy Lu sure was. Still is. Well," she said, "I'll be on the beach, happen you change your mind."

"I won't."

She giggled. "That wife of yours sure got you hog-tied, ain't she?"

"Now, you look here—!"

"Never mind. I dig it, Davy. You know where to find me later on."

She undulated down the steps. Dave closed the door with unnecessary violence and wondered, as he did so, whether the violence was directed entirely at Thelma or partly at himself. He was honest enough to admit that he did feel a little flattered by the interest of a young and pretty girl, but he was also realistic. He wanted nothing more to do with her. It was lucky that his painting only needed a few finishing touches, or, in his confused state, he might have botched the job. As it was, he completed it within two hours, and then did something he refrained from doing as a rule. He mixed a cocktail before lunch.

It was a self-congratulatory gesture of celebration, and he carried the martini to the living room. He was holding it when there came a second rapping on the door. This time it was Lu Warren.

Warren was a thin man who dressed habitually in khaki shirts

and trousers. He was a care-ridden fifty with an accent that was the male equivalent of Thelma's. He had a nervous, fretful manner, and Dave had noticed the same manner in Amy Warren. He had wondered what common calamity had formed the worry-lines in their lean faces, and since last night he had suspected that it was each other. That might partly explain Thelma's presence in the house while Amy was away.

"Hello, Lu," Dave said. "What's on your mind?"

"Want to ask you something, Mr. Russell. You're friendly with my . . . cousin?" There was a significant pause before he spoke the final word.

"Friendly?"

"Well, you drew this picture, didn't you?" The sketch Dave had made the day before was thrust into his hand. "Just one thing I want to know," Lu said. "Was it you that took her out last night?"

The creaking of the gate at the head of the stairs attracted Dave's attention. He looked up. Helen was standing there. She had come home unexpectedly and, by her expression, she had heard what Lu had said.

Lu had also seen her. He nodded curtly. "Hi, Miz Russell." He scowled at Dave. "Talk to you about it later." He turned away.

"You'll talk about it now. The answer's no. I heard her come home last night, and I heard you. I heard

everything you both said. Like me to repeat the conversation?"

Lu took a backward step, alarmed. "Needn't take that attitude, Mr. Russell. I was just asking."

"You've been answered." Dave ignored him, holding his left hand out to Helen. "Glad you came home early, darling."

Helen said nothing. The cocktail glass in Dave's right hand assumed the proportions of a gallon jug as she came slowly down the steps.

The prowl car cruised north on the stretch between the breakwater and Martinez Canyon. Tommy Riggs was driving. Earl Bingham sat beside him, a placid mass. Earl did not notice the beautiful blonde girl, but Tommy did. She was standing at the gate beside which he had picked her up the previous night. He almost drove past before deciding to give the kid another break.

"Hi, Thelma. How you feel?" he called.

She shrugged a bare, indifferent shoulder. Earl, leaning forward to get a better look, saw that she had a red dingus on her head and that she was wearing a tight black swimming suit.

"Ain't that the girl was on the beach yesterday?" he asked.

Tommy said off-handedly, "Correct."

"You know her?"

"Spoke to her, didn't I? Name's Thelma."

Earl thought about it for a minute. As Tommy turned in to park beside the bridge, he said, "You didn't know her yesterday."

"Yesterday's twenty-four hours ago."

The car was stopped, as usual, facing the highway. Earl waited until Tommy had set the brakes. "You must of met her last night, then."

"That's right, Earl. That brain of yours is working overtime today."

"Yeah," Earl agreed soberly. "Yeah, it is. How'd you make out with her?" he asked.

An expansive grin lit Tommy's handsome face. "Now you've embarrassed me. As a gentleman, I can't answer that. But I'll tell you this much—she's no different from any other dame, you know how to handle 'em. I know how." He opened the car door. "You got any more questions, prepare to ask 'em. I'm going over to see Mildred."

The furrows in Earl's narrow forehead grew deeper. "I got one more question, Tommy. Yesterday you was talking about the guy that kissed her on the beach. You said seeing an older man making a play for a kid like that—you said it made you sick."

"Did I say that?"

Earl nodded. "Then you go and make a play for her yourself. How come?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Tommy said. "With me, the circumstances are entirely different."

"What circumstances?"

"It's simple. That artist and I are two entirely different people. He's him, I'm me. What's right for me is wrong for him and maybe vice versa, maybe not. It all depends." He jumped out of the car. "You think that over for a while."

Earl watched him swagger across the road. He thought it over. If it had come from anyone but Tommy, he would have said it didn't make good sense. And Tommy or not, he was getting tired of having his questions answered in a sort of fancy double-talk. Just because a fellow thinks slow doesn't mean he doesn't think good, when he thinks.

There was a breeze from the east. Smog settled over the beach like a dirty cotton blanket. The brilliant, energetic day turned glum. Swimmers bundled up their gear, drove home. Dave and Helen went about their individual tasks, treating each other with self-conscious courtesy. Dave got together the materials necessary for wrapping his picture for the mail. Helen compiled a grocery list and crossed the beach road to the supermarket. Walking, she had a tendency to come down hard on her heels.

It was only too clear now that, during the daylight hours while

she'd been working, Dave had spent his time lounging on the beach. Playing around with a vicious little juvenile delinquent, drawing pictures of her, arousing Lu Warren's protective jealousy. He could rationalize his behavior all he pleased; the fact remained that he had deliberately concealed the truth about the girl. He hadn't even mentioned that he'd met her. And, since he had concealed their acquaintanceship, it was perfectly obvious that what existed between them was a good deal more than that. It was much more likely—

Helen got that far in her angry reasoning, and no further. She suddenly realized to what end her suspicions must inevitably lead her, if they turned out to be true. A lonely, bitter end. A vacuum, because life without Dave would be no more than that.

She had already paid for her groceries. They boy was putting them in a heavy paper bag. She caught up the bag and almost ran out of the store. A truck slammed on its brakes, just missing her as she crossed the road. She ran through the gate and down the steps. The front door was standing open. She went in.

She came to an unbelieving halt. Dave was leaning out of the window, talking to someone below him on the beach. She knew who it was even before she heard the hateful, whining voice.

"Lu's gone to Palisades City. And

your wife ain't here, so why not, Davy? I'm lonesome. Come on down."

Helen was not conscious of having made a sound, but she must have done so. Dave whirled around. She studied his guilty face for a long moment, then turned and crossed the living room to the bedroom stairs. Silently, with natural dignity. The door at the head of the stairs always stood open. She locked it as Dave started up the steps.

He banged on the door. She lay face down on the bed, hands over her ears. She could still faintly hear his muffled voice, sense from its changing tone that he was growing angry. But she was too hurt even to attempt a reply.

The noise stopped after a while but she still lay motionless. An hour passed before she got up, washed her face. She went down to the living room prepared to suffer through an explanation and, perhaps an abject apology, but it was too late by that time.

Dave had gone.

There were only a few customers in the cafe and Hazel was taking care of them. Mildred sat beside the kitchen window, fingering a letter. The letter had arrived only that morning, but already she knew it by heart. Unlike Ralph's other letters, this one said something. It said too much.

"Dear Mom,

I'm sending this out by a guy they're turning loose, a friend of mine, so the screws won't get a chance to read it. When I wrote you before that everything was fine and they were treating me okay, I was lying, Mom. Maybe I would deserve to be treated this way if I was guilty, but I'm not guilty. Tom Riggs framed me. He was jealous because he knew you loved me, and he picked up Hank's switchblade after he run us off the road and Hank got killed, and he planted the switchblade on me and swore I pulled it on him. I never did, and I would have told the judge what happened but I thought you was sold on Riggs, so I thought what the hell.

Mom, I'm breaking out of here. This friend of mine they're turning loose is going to get a car and come back and pick me up. There's a place in the wire I can get through, and what I want you to do is pack a suitcase and have it ready when I phone. I'll phone you Monday night. Please don't worry. Everything's all set.

Your loving son . . ."

Mildred put the creased letter in the pocket of her apron. She tried to decide what she should do, and was incapable of reaching a decision. She didn't want Ralph to try

to escape. Even if he were successful, the act of escaping would place him in defiance of the law. And no boy, no man, can defy the law without warping something in his character. Something deep inside Ralph that had been straight would be forever twisted out of shape.

On the other hand, she could not bring herself to notify the school's authorities. That would have been treachery. Her lips moved, forming silent words.

Mildred was praying, not knowing that she prayed.

Palisades City is a boardwalk beach town. Until a half-hour after midnight its boardwalk, which is really a broad cement sidewalk lined on both sides with tawdry shops, is a rowdy, garishly illuminated pedestrian thoroughfare. At half-past twelve the colored neons are turned off as though someone had pulled a master switch. After that, only the street lamps are left. They shed a cold synthetic moonlight over shuttered stores and empty benches, all waiting for the returning crowd to bring them back to life.

Dave came out of the Palisades Theatre at ten minutes before twelve. He had sat through the feature picture twice, and had no idea of how he could further pass the time until Helen might reasonably be presumed to have gone to bed. He did not want to go home until that happened.

The center of the boardwalk was

occupied by a long line of benches. He went to one of them and sat down. The Rambler had been left in a parking lot two blocks away; in another hour he would reclaim it and drive home. All he had to do was sit still for another sixty minutes. But sitting still was more difficult than he had thought.

His mind was in rebellion, and his eyes were as restless as his mind. Fleetinglly they noted individual faces in the crowd, a shooting gallery directly ahead and, no its right, an open counter piled high with salt water taffy. On his left a sign above a crimson door read, *The Beach Bar—Cocktails*, and beyond that another sign called attention to the offices of *Dexter*. Somewhere Dave had seen or heard that name before. He got up and crossed to the twenty-foot store front.

There were no windows, only an open double door across which a black star-spangled curtain had been drawn. A tripod beside the door held a large black placard. In the center of the placard was a photograph of a bearded man who wore a turban. This was presumably *Dexter*, and grouped around his photograph were a number of glossy prints of moving picture celebrities. All of these were autographed, and curiously all the autographs were in the same scrawled handwriting. Five-pointed tinsel stars were scattered among the glossy prints and, at the bottom of the placard, silver letters read,

The Man Who Guides The Stars.

The phrase stirred Dave's memory. He recalled the circumstances in which he had heard the name before. Thelma had mumbled it when she had come home drunk the previous night.

Everything revolved around that damned girl. She was omni-present, he thought bitterly, and he was aghast that only that afternoon he had been a little flattered because she had displayed an interest in him. One of her favorite words came back to him: Crazy. It would aptly have described his addled state of mind. He went back to the bench, looked at his watch. Only twenty minutes had passed. The time was ten minutes before twelve.

The world had shrunk for Thelma. She lay on the beach and vaguely wondered why she had ever let herself get steamed up about the things she didn't have. Everything she wanted was right here within reaching distance. Her back itched. She rubbed it against a small convenient boulder that had become embedded between her shoulder blades. A couple of feet away, beside a shallow pool left by the tide, there was a bottle. The moon was so bright that she could see how full the bottle was. The moon was peeking at her over the top of Point of Rocks. It was close. Her right forefinger stirred the shallow pool. If she felt like it, she

could have lifted her finger and poked the old moon in the eye.

A man lay on the sand beside her. His arms were around her so tight it hurt her ribs. She tried to remember what his name was. He'd told it to her a day, an hour, a week before, but she'd forgotten it. Ask her right now what he looked like, and she couldn't even tell you that. It didn't make much difference. He was a man.

She wriggled out of his arms and rolled away, for no better reason than to see what he would do. She giggled when he did what she'd expected. He reached out and grabbed, just missing her, and the shadows mixed with moonlight painted funny pictures on his face. His hair was mussed up, so that it looked as though he had two horns sprouting from his forehead. Like a billy goat, or like a bull. She took a drink from the bottle, screwed the top back on again. It was so comical she laughed out loud. She took the red babushka off her head and dangled it in front of her, the way she'd seen a bull fighter in the movies do. She remembered an old song she had learned when she was just a kid. She sang it to him, giggling, waving her babushka in the moonlight.

"Toreador-a, don't spit on the floor-a,

Use the cuspidor-a, that's what it's for-a . . ."

She was only doing it for kicks, but it turned out that he wasn't

fooling. All of a sudden he made a big jump and landed right on top of her, and started getting fresh. Real fresh. That wouldn't have been too bad if only he'd been nice about it, but he wasn't a bit nice. He was rough, and Thelma wasn't the kind of girl that was going to stand for being treated rough. She told him so and tried to shove him off, but he didn't pay the least bit of attention. He was pressing all the wind out of her and it was getting hard to breathe, so she lifted up her forefinger and poked him in the eye. The left eye. And before he could do anything about it, she poked him in the other.

It was funny how he acted then. He didn't make a sound. He got up on his knees and, for a minute, she thought she'd taught him a good lesson and that he would treat her nicer after that. He couldn't have been seeing good, but he still kept hold of her with one strong hand. The other hand fumbled around beside him on the beach. He picked up something, and Thelma saw it was the boulder she had used to scratch her back. She tried to roll away, but he had her pinned down tight. He lifted the boulder and slammed it hard against her head.

That was another funny thing; it didn't really hurt much. It dazed her, though, and scared hell out of her. And maybe it knocked her out—but only for a second. She knew what was happening when she felt

his hand start yanking at her hair. But it was as though it was happening to somebody else, not her. There'd been a mistake somewhere. She'd never hurt anybody. She was just Thelma, out for kicks, an hour late and a dollar short, and she tried to explain this, but he rolled her over and pushed her face down in the pool. She yelled then, yelled loud, but the only sound that got out was a sort of roaring bubble. Water choked the rest.

Dave did not notice the sudden semi-darkness when, within minutes of each other, all the neons were clicked off. He looked up after a while and found himself alone on a deserted boardwalk. It was time to start for home.

He got up wearily and returned to the parking lot. On the beach road going north, he had to slow down because of a gang of men in hard shipworkers' helmets who were staring apprehensively at the overhanging palisades. Since the spring rains there had been trouble with landslides, and Dave recognized the men as a work crew bent on preventing traffic tieups before they happened. As he was waiting for the signal to resume normal speed, he heard a shout and felt a sharp jolt against the car. He stopped, knowing what had happened: a boulder had rolled down the palisades and hit his right front wheel. There was no damage.

That did not prevent the foreman from taking down his name and license number. When he was permitted to go ahead, it was with the understanding that he might be called upon to testify to the foreman's competence and to the accidental nature of what had happened. That was all right. He did not expect ever to be called. There was no other incident on his way home. He reached there at twenty minutes after one.

The window of the bedroom was dark, and now glow came up the exterior stairway from the Warrens' place. Dave had to feel his way past the porch and down to his front door. He unlocked the door and let himself into pitch-blackness, made his way uncertainly to the couch. He took off his jacket, shoes and trousers, and lay down in his shirt and shorts.

He lay down but did not immediately go to sleep. Seconds later he heard the soft shutting of the bedroom door. Helen had been awake; she had waited in the darkness until he came home. Dave smiled grimly in the direction of the unseen ceiling. He closed his eyes.

They opened again at twenty minutes before two. He verified the time by looking at the radium dial of his watch. It was less easy to be certain of what had awakened him but, listening, he heard footsteps passing the front door. There was no other sound except that of the sea.

The footsteps went heavily, slowly down the stairs. Dave thought of them as heavy because the steps creaked under their weight. A picture formed in his mind of a grotesquely fat man tiptoeing down to the beach.

He fell asleep and dreamed of the fat man standing knee-deep in surf, washing away layer after layer of adipose tissue. When the man returned to the house, he was no longer fat. His footsteps, as they climbed the stairs, were stealthy but brisk and light.

Dave was suddenly wide awake. The sounds were real; they were not part of his dream. Footsteps were again passing the door, this time going up. It was ten minutes before two. He got up, exasperated, went to the kitchen and looked out of the window.

It was too dark on the beach road to see much. Another car had pulled in behind the Rambler. Someone had opened the door, was climbing behind the wheel. It was a man; Dave could tell that much, no more. The car was only a black hulk. He could not even be certain of its make.

He turned away—and was stopped by an odd tinkling sound. At almost two in the morning an ice cream truck should be in its garage, but Dave distinctly heard familiar notes. They formed the refrain, *Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?* he had heard the afternoon before.

He went back to the window but by that time the truck had passed beyond his range of hearing. The car that had been parked behind his own was just starting to drive off. Dave did not wait to see it disappear. He returned to the couch, fell instantly asleep and did not wake up again until six-thirty in the morning.

He was still tired. Normally he would have slept for another couple of hours. Some unaccustomed deviation from routine must have pulled him back to consciousness. There was an appreciable lapse of time before he became aware of what the deviation was. Helen's most prized luxury was having her breakfast coffee in bed. But this morning the familiar odor was already perceptible in the living room.

It was a bad sign. It probably indicated an unwillingness on her part to accept any favors from him, even so slight a favor as making morning coffee. Dave pulled on his shoes and trousers. If the cold war was going to continue, he might as well get dressed. He approached the kitchen warily.

Coffee was bubbling in the percolator and Helen was busy at the kitchen table. A wicker hamper was on the table and she was making sandwiches. She looked up as he came in.

"Picnic today," she announced. Her voice was gentle and subdued. "We need a change of scene. I'd

like to go up in the hills to our old place. Maybe when we come back we'll be more like we used to be." She smiled uncertainly. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"Sometimes you provoke me beyond the limits of my patience. But I love you," she said, after they had kissed.

The canyon wound inland for thirteen miles, climbing between rocky hills that were high enough to be small mountains. The last few miles were up a steep grade until, just below the crest, they reached what Helen had referred to as their "old place." They had come here often during the first years of their marriage, a shady spot fifty yards off the road, from which the surrounding country unfolded far beneath them like a lumpy green and yellow bedspread. There were no rusty cans or other evidences of previous picnickers; apparently few people wandered this far from the road. They ate their lunch in privacy and an atmosphere of renewed serenity, and Dave gave her a detailed account of how he'd spent the previous evening. He told her about the footsteps and the ice cream wagon, too.

"And don't say I was dreaming. I actually heard them. I was as wide awake as I am now."

"Wider, by the way you're yawning."

He nodded. "That reminds me.

It's time for my siesta now."

There was a beach mat in the car. He spread it on the grass and lay down on it. He slept with his head on Helen's lap.

The sun sets early in the mountains. At six, when they went back to the car, it was already getting dark. They ran into sunlight again, however, as topping the crest they came for a moment in sight of the sea. They drove inland five more miles, then doubled back southwest, and they had dinner at a restaurant overlooking the ocean. It was a good dinner. Afterwards, they started for home by what they thought was the shortest route, along the beach.

But the road was blocked; the expected landslide had taken place. They were forced to detour inland and return through Martinez Canyon. Lights were burning in both sections of the house when they finally reached home. A sheriff's car and a police cruiser were parked beside the gate.

Helen touched Dave's hand. Her voice was puzzled. "Why the police? You suppose Lu's in trouble?"

"Lord knows." He indicated two deputies standing at the gate. "They'll tell us."

Dave stopped behind the sheriff's car. Before he could slide from under the wheel a deputy was at his side.

"Russell?" He was a flashily handsome man, his features aquiline as an Indian's.

Dave nodded.

"This your wife?"

"This is Mrs. Russell."

The deputy opened the car door. "Bingham," he called, "take this woman down to the lieutenant." His hand closed forcefully around Dave's wrist.

A second, massive deputy showed up on the right side of the car. He said, "This way, ma'am." Helen silently climbed out.

Dave controlled his anger. He waited until she had been escorted through the gate. "Am I under arrest? If so, for what?" he asked.

"Ask the lieutenant. He's waiting to talk to you."

"Unless I am under arrest, take your hands off me," Dave said.

The first deputy grinned. He twisted Dave's wrist and gave it a vicious jerk. As Dave came out of the car, his left arm was doubled painfully behind his back.

"Goddamn kid-killer." The deputy ran him forward and around the car; he was pushed through the gate. "Get down there," the man said, and shoved him down the steps.

There was a dazed period wherein things happened, he was pushed and pulled, and voices spoke to each other, but it was like watching the screen of a drive-in movie from far away. He saw moving figures but could not distinguish one from another. He heard blurred sound but could not make out words.

Then abruptly there was silence

and the scene swam into focus. He stood in the middle of the living room. Deputies stood beside him, one on either side. In front of him was a lean man with graying temples. At first glance he appeared to be intelligent, but Dave was in no mood to take people at face value. He reserved judgment, concentrating on the fact that the man, although obviously a policeman, wore well-cut civilian clothes. That might, or might not, be an indication that he was less brutal and moronic than the others. Helen leaned against the wall. Her eyes were anguished, her face was pale and drawn.

"It's the truth, Lieutenant!" she was saying. "My husband was at home last night!"

"Not all night, Mrs. Russell," the lean man said gently. "We have a witness who saw him about one o'clock." He turned to Dave. "I'm Lieutenant Morgan, temporarily attached to the sheriff's sub-station. I'll need your statement."

"I'd give it to you, if someone would tell me what the statement is supposed to be about."

The lieutenant frowned. "Don't you read the papers? Thelma Grant was found this morning—murdered."

The name meant nothing. "This is ridiculous," Dave said. "I don't know anyone—" Then a message Helen had been trying to flash to him suddenly grew clear. He took a quick step forward. "You

mean Lu Warren's cousin?"

Lieutenant Morgan nodded. The breath went out of Dave. He felt as though he had been kicked in the solar plexus. "So help me," he said slowly, "I hardly knew her. This is the first time I ever heard her full name." He took another step. The handsome deputy stopped him by grabbing at his arm. "You say she's murdered?"

"That's what we're trying to establish," the policeman said. "Mind coming along?"

Dave frowned at the hand clasped around his arm. "Do I have any choice?"

"We just want a few people to see you, and to ask some questions. I'd appreciate it if you came willingly. It would make things easier."

"By all means, let's make things easier," Dave said.

Morgan nodded to the deputies. "Mr. Russell will ride with you. I'll follow. Want to talk to Mrs. Russell for a minute?"

The deputy jerked Dave's arm. "Let's go." Dave said nothing. He allowed himself to be led out.

He was hit the instant the front door shut behind them, hit hard back of the ear. He fell forward, landing on the steps.

"Take it easy, can't you?" The voice of the deputy named Bingham seemed to come from a great distance. "You don't know he's guilty. Nobody knows that."

"As far as I'm concerned, he's guilty," Tommy said.

Helen waited for Dave to call but the hours passed and the telephone was silent. A clock ticked, waves tumbled on the beach, the tide ran out, and still there was no message. At two o'clock she lifted the telephone but, after holding it for half a minute, slowly replaced it in its cradle. She went back to the couch, picked up the evening paper. She shuddered as again she saw the glaring headline, **GIRL'S BODY FOUND ON BEACH.** The paper came out while she and Dave were in the mountains.

She sat on the couch and for the sixth time read the story. It was a sensational story. The body, dressed only in panties and brassiere, had been discovered about breakfast time that morning. It was lying, hidden from the house where the girl had been visiting, at the foot of a small embankment near the sea. Thelma's other clothes were neatly piled some distance away. A preliminary medical examination had disclosed the presence of water in her lungs, and police had first supposed her death to be suicide or accidental drowning.

Helen raised her hand to the venetian blind. If she had lifted the blind she could have seen the embankment at the foot of which Thelma's body had been found. She did not lift it. She went back to the story.

Two hours after the discovery of the body, a red babushka identified as Thelma's had been picked up

miles to the north at Point of Rocks; and a more thorough examination, conducted about the same time, had shown a swollen bruise on the girl's head. The babushka was torn, and other signs of a struggle had been found in the area. Thelma, it now appeared, had been knocked unconscious shortly after midnight and her head held under water in one of the pools left by the tide at Point of Rocks.

Lucius Warren, brought in for questioning, had admitted that the girl was not a relative. He had met her in Palisades City where she had been employed as a salesgirl. He was being held tentatively on a charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Police, acting on information furnished them by Warren, were looking for David Russell, an artist who occupied the upper part of the Warren house and who was said to have been on familiar terms with Thelma Grant.

Familiar! The hateful word stirred Helen into action. She dropped the paper, went to the phone and told the operator to ring the sub-station.

She gave her name to the man who answered, and told him she was calling about her husband. "He hasn't come home. I don't know what to do."

"Hold the line, please." There was a pause while the man asked muffled questions. Then he spoke into the phone again. "They took him to the city, Mrs. Russell. They

haven't booked him yet, if that's what you mean."

"Of course they haven't booked him!" Helen sounded more indignant than she felt; actually she was relieved. "He didn't take his car. I just wanted to know what time I can pick him up."

"Couldn't tell you, ma'am," the man said.

Helen hung up and walked to the ship's clock hung decoratively on the wall beside the bedroom stairs. She checked the time; then she straightened magazines on a table at the far end of the room. She moved like a somnabulist, and, when she suddenly climbed to the kitchen, her action was compulsive, governed by no motive known consciously to herself.

In the kitchen she opened the refrigerator. It contained, among other items, a plate of cold sliced meat left over from the picnic. She was not hungry but she crammed two slices of tongue and one of turkey in her mouth, and was only stopped from eating more by the creaking of the gate out by the porch. Someone was coming down the steps.

She almost fell in her hurry to get to the door. She pushed it open and ran out.

"Dave!"

The man on the steps continued downward. She knew instantly that it was not Dave, but he had come within six feet before she recognized Lu Warren.

"Mr. Warren, have you seen my husband?"

"I seen him." Warren's voice was bitter. "Told the cops about him, too." He passed her and kept on going down the steps. "Hope they put him in the gas chamber. It's what he deserves."

Helen's hand groped blindly for the banister. She watched the landlord until he had reached the sandy patio and passed from sight. Then she returned to the living room and lay down on the couch, forearm covering her eyes. Her eyes ached with the pressure of accumulated tears, but she did not cry. There would be time for crying later. Lots of time.

It was dawn when Dave finally came home. Helen heard him on the stairs, but this time she did not go running to the door. She sat up and waited. He saw her as soon as he came in.

He smiled faintly. "Tough night? I know how you feel."

She said. "Sit down. Tell me what happened."

"Isn't there any coffee?"

"I'll make some. You sit down and rest."

When she returned with the coffee, he was asleep sitting in his chair. Her instinctive pity put up only a token struggle before anxiety completely routed it. She set the coffee down and shook his shoulder.

"Wake up, dear."

He woke as a hunted animal

wakes—standing, poised to run. "What's the matter?"

"That's what I want to know," she said.

He sat down again, sipped coffee, lit a cigarette. She noted the dark circles under his eyes, and gave him all the time he needed. When he seemed more relaxed, she said, "Tell me about it. Start from the beginning."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "They questioned me. Know what a police questioning consists of? The same old questions asked over and over again for hours and hours. It seemed to disappoint them that I kept on giving the same answers. Finally they let me go—drove me home, as a matter of fact. That's all for tonight. My present status is a polite form of house arrest. I'm supposed to be here when they want me."

"Why?"

"Look, darling — they have to have a suspect. The public expects it of them. It's a rule. Lou Warren's out. At the time she was murdered he was looking all over the place for her, and people saw him. Ken Hurley, among other people. They may still get him on that contributing charge, but not for murder. He's clear on that."

"You're not?"

He shook his head. "Lu spent a lot of time upon the road last night. I wasn't home at the time the murder was committed, and he knows it. Then there's the foreman of a

gang of road workers. He talked to me at one."

"But how about the ice cream wagon? How about those footsteps you hear?"

"I told all that to Morgan. Told him about Dexter, too." Dave shrugged. "He said he'd look into it . . ."

His voice trailed off. She had to prompt him. "Well?"

"I don't think he believed me. He didn't seem impressed." Dave got up. "I'm going to have to go to bed."

"When does Morgan want to see you again? What about?"

"Ask him. He'll be here at eleven. Please, Helen," he begged. "I've got things to do. Before I do them I have to get some sleep."

She let him go. By that time it was half-past five, and she'd had no sleep herself. She lay down on the couch but could not keep her eyes closed. At eight she got up. She could no longer be inactive, waiting submissively for terrible things to happen. What Dave had described as a polite form of house arrest did not apply to her.

Dave seemed to be sleeping. She hurried from the house and down the road to the cottage occupied by the young man who drove the ice cream truck. She'd known Ken Hurley, as Dave had, when he'd worked at the service station. Her heart beat rapidly as she knocked on the cottage door.

No one came to open it. She

called, "Mr. Hurley—!" but there was no evidence of life beyond the door. She didn't give up. It had been a good try, and she could come back later.

Helen went back to the house. She called the shop and left word for Mr. Victor that she would not be able to work that day. Hanging up, she heard Dave coming from the kitchen. She turned toward the steps.

She started to explain, "Just calling—" and broke off in surprise. "You're going out?"

He nodded. "All dressed up to have my fortune told. Morgan didn't believe me about Dexter. I'll have to see the guy myself."

"You're not supposed to leave the house. Morgan will be here at eleven."

"So will I. Fresh coffee will be ready in a minute. If Morgan expected me to stay in one place," Dave said, "he should have kept me in his jail."

There are some people a guy just naturally hates on sight. They affect you like an overdose of raw corn liquor. Tangle with one of them, and you wake up next morning with all the symptoms of a hangover. Tommy Riggs woke up Monday morning with a dry mouth and a headache. If it hadn't been for Dave Russell, he would have got to bed earlier and slept better. He would have wakened

feeling fine, ready to go to work.

But work, today, wouldn't have been a good idea anyway. Some of the people at the sub-station—Corporal Gonzalez in particular—were gunning for him. Tommy had to keep a jump ahead of them. Right now he had to get himself in a position where he could just sort of casually mention what he had been doing Friday and Saturday nights. Block any thought of a connection between Thelma and himself before it could get started. There was no telling what might happen if word that they had known each other got around.

It would be easy enough. Mildred and Earl could be counted on to give him alibis. Mildred was nuts about him, and Earl would do anything that Tommy said. Nobody had actually seen him with Thelma, so he didn't have to worry about that. Tommy dressed, and drove his yellow convertible down the beach to Mildred's place.

He turned the motor off, staring moodily across the road at the window of Russell's bedroom. What a racket! Russell was probably still asleep while he, Tommy, had been forced to haul his backside out of bed at dawn to make a third-rate living. Around noon, Russell would get up, slap a little paint on canvas and sell the canvas for a couple of thousand bucks. It wasn't fair.

But the hell with thinking about Russell. What he had to concen-

trate on right now was being nice to Mildred. And what she'd always liked best was a little sweet talk about the future. She needed something to build on, hope for. He got out of the convertible, opened the door of the cafe.

"Hey, Mildred!" he called.

It was Hazel's day off. Mildred sat in the kitchen by herself. She turned as he came in, and Tommy saw that something must have happened. There were new lines in her face, and she looked old. He gave her a winning smile.

"Honey, I got a proposition to make. You interested?"

She shook her head. "No proposition of yours would interest me."

Tommy's voice dropped in pitch, became utterly sincere. "You just listen for a minute. I do a lot of horsing around, but actually I'm a very serious type," he said. "A family man, you know? I don't like the way things are with you and me. I live all by myself up in this room, and all I do is sleep and look at television and go to work. And I don't like the kind of work I'm doing now. It's got no future in it, understand?"

Mildred said quietly, "You're a little late worrying about your future. That was all decided long ago."

"You may be right. I always felt I was intended to do something big." He smiled ingratiatingly. "Well, what I got to say boils down to this. How's about you and me

getting together again? I could come down here and run this restaurant. Maybe I could handle a few cars—clean ones, strictly high-class—on the side. When Ralph gets out, and if he's learned his lesson, I might be able to throw a job his way. All we need is a little capital; we'd have it made. So how's it strike you, Milly—pretty good?"

There was a silence. Then Mildred got slowly to her feet. "Get out. Get out, you son of a bitch," she said.

Tommy was so shocked that he started to obey. He had turned toward the front door before he thoroughly realized that she had meant what she had called him, and he got mad.

"Hey!" He turned back quickly.

"Nobody, least of all a god-damned woman, can call me that!"

Her hand was in the pocket of her apron. "Tom, I haven't even begun to tell you what I think of you. You don't want to hear it, you'd better get out fast." She took a slow, determined step in his direction. "You framed Ralph."

"That's a lie!"

"It's the truth. I know that now. I know a lot about you, and every bit of it is bad. How about that little blonde girl that got murdered—Thelma Grant?"

Tommy shivered. It was as though someone had poured a bucket of ice cold water down his spine. "Well, what about her? I didn't even know the girl," he said.

"Is that what you'll tell the district attorney? I don't think he'll believe you. I saw you with her Friday. Suppose I tell him so?"

"This is a sample of what you'll get," he said, and clipped her on the jaw.

She crumpled to the floor. Tommy looked at her a moment, then suddenly he got frightened. He hadn't meant to hit her. He didn't like to hit women, as a rule. He'd have a hell of a job now, talking her into doing what he wanted. It might be better to wait a while before he tried. He went out to his car.

But he was nervous. His mind was working frantically, much faster than it usually did. He'd thought he was safe but, if Mildred had seen him with Thelma, it followed that other people might have seen him, too.

Abruptly, he remembered Dexter. He hesitated a moment. The fortune teller didn't know his name. There was a possibility that Dexter wouldn't remember him at all. Just the same, he had to make sure. There was no use trying to do anything with Mildred until he had made sure. He started his convertible, turned south into the beach road.

Just before he reached the Warren house, a Rambler nudged into the traffic ahead of him. Dave Russell was driving it. Tommy scowled, wondering where Russell was headed for. Then, as the blocks

passed and the Rambler anticipated every turn that would take both it and the convertible to Palisades City, that icy feeling began playing up and down Tommy's spine again. Even before the Rambler turned into the parking lot near Dexter's place, Tommy knew it was a good thing he hadn't gone to work. He had to get to the fortune teller before Russell did.

The telephone booth was in front of a drug store on the east side of the boardwalk. From it, Tommy could see the entrance to Dexter's place. That damned attendant in the parking lot had held him up. Russell had beat him by a whole half-block.

Tommy was dialing the telephone as he watched. He heard it ring, heard the gruff voice of Corporal Gonzalez at the sub-station up the coast.

"This is Riggs," he said. "Corporal, I don't feel so good. Doctor says I shouldn't work today."

"I feel for you, Riggs, but I can't quite reach you. Bingham got less sleep than you did, but he's on the job."

"Swear to God, that's exactly what I told the doctor. Said it'd look funny as hell, my partner working and me not. You want to talk to the doctor, Corporal? He's right here."

"No, I don't want to talk to any doctor. But there is a matter I'd

like to discuss with you. A personal matter. At your convenience, of course."

The connection was broken but Tommy still held the receiver to his ear. As long as he looked like he was talking, nobody would pay any attention to him in the booth. He was sweating, although the day's heat had not yet begun. That damned Gonzalez had the knife in him, all right!

He was still at the telephone when Russell came out of Dexter's. Russell headed back toward the parking lot. Tommy darted from the booth as soon as he was out of sight.

He ran across the boardwalk, did an about-face, and walked right back into the booth again. He'd nearly run into a guy he knew, Dick Swope, a plainclothes man attached to the city force. A disturbing possibility occurred to him. Swope might be standing on a plant outside of Dexter's place.

But why? How could first Russell, and then Swope, have known that he'd brought Thelma here to have her fortune told? It was all very confusing, but Tommy dismissed the idea of personal danger after a moment's thought. For one thing, Swope was paying no attention to Dexter. His interest was centered on a cute little redhead he'd just run into on the boardwalk. Tommy watched the detective sit down beside her on a bench. Swope's back was turned.

Once more Tommy left the booth.

And once more he was forced to return to it. A couple of yokels—they looked like honeymooners—stood giggling in front of the black placard until the old fortune teller, complete with beard and turban, came out and roped them in.

Swope was still on the bench when those two came out again. But he was making good time with the redhead; Tommy knew from experience that a man in Swope's position couldn't think of two things at once. He didn't bother to take precautions. He hurried over to Dexter's, brushed the yokels aside, went in the door.

Dexter met him in the tiny, curtained reception room. He bowed, touching his forehead, lips and heart. "Good morning," he said, his accent as thick as it was fake. "You are deeply disturbed, sair. I 'ave known that you were coming. I 'ave seen it in the stars."

He was a slight old man. Tommy rushed him through a second door into the rear, private room. He shut the door, turned the key and popped a chair beneath the knob.

"I'll get to you in a minute," he said, as the old man mouthed silent, frightened words. He crossed to the window, opened it, looked out. A stationary ladder descended from the window to the beach. Dexter had provided himself with an emergency exit. He'd been smart, but not smart enough.

Tommy shut the window. He returned to the trembling fortune teller. "Remember me?" he asked.

"You . . . you . . . No! I never seen you in my life!" Dexter's accent was forgotten. He was so agitated he could hardly speak.

"That's the right answer, but you took too long to say it. Now we got to make sure, next time somebody asks you, you come up with the right answer and come up fast."

Tommy took a blackjack from his pocket and went scientifically to work.

It was only a little after ten when Dave got home, but a police car had parked beside the gate and a uniformed policeman waited at the wheel. Dave wasn't worried. If Morgan wanted to get tough, he had material now with which to soften him. He got out of the Rambler, went down the steps and entered the living room. Lieutenant Morgan was with Helen.

As far as he could tell, Helen was perfectly at ease. She was sitting on the couch, drinking coffee and talking to the lieutenant. Morgan rose as Dave came in. The policeman's face remained expressionless but, as Dave approached, he saw that Helen's calm had been assumed. The sight of him had brought relief into her eyes.

"Lieutenant Morgan's been waiting to talk to you," she said.

Morgan nodded. "Mr. Russell, I

understand you went to call on Dexter. I thought I asked you to stay at home."

"What did you expect?" Dave shrugged. "Somebody had to talk to him."

"Dexter's place has been staked out since six this morning. He was the next man on my list. Now—" Morgan sighed, went over to the phone. "Mind if I make a call?"

He dialed a number. "Lieutenant Morgan. Have Swope bring Dexter in immediately." He read the number from the telephone. "Call me back."

He hung up, and thoughtfully recrossed the room. "Well, Mr. Russell, what did you find out?"

"Two things," Dave said. "Thelma was there Friday evening with a man."

"Description?"

"No luck. That rear room of his is heavily curtained and he keeps the lighting dim. The man stood over in the corner. Dexter couldn't see his face."

"Curious. Even a shadow in a corner has dimensions," Morgan said. "If it talks, it has a certain kind of voice. You said you found out two things, Mr. Russell. That's only one."

Dave said quietly, "The man with Thelma was a policeman. He wasn't wearing his uniform, but Thelma had been drinking. She let it slip."

There was an intense but only momentary silence. Dave looked

at Helen, and she looked back at him. Morgan had been smoking. He crossed to an ash tray, snubbed out his cigarette.

"May I have more coffee, Mrs. Russell, please?" he asked.

Grudgingly, Dave admitted to a sneaking admiration for the lieutenant. Morgan had poise. He gave no indication that he had just lost his Number One suspect and, as a substitute, been handed one of his own men. He stirred his coffee, sipped it black.

"We'll wait a minute. Maybe Dexter will be able to tell us a little more," he said.

The telephone rang as he was putting down his empty cup. "That's probably for me." He crossed the room to answer it.

"Yes? . . . Speaking." Dave, watching, saw quick anger form in the policeman's eyes. He saw the effort with which Morgan fought it down. "Well, you know what to do. Tell Swope—" he said, and checked himself. "Never mind. I'll talk to Swope myself."

He hung up and turned to Dave. "Dexter's not talking to anybody. He's on his way to the hospital with a fractured skull."

"An accident?" Dave got his answer from the expression on Lieutenant Morgan's face. "Hey, wait a minute—you're not accusing me! Somebody must have done it after I left. Somebody—"

"That's right, Mr. Russell. Somebody. I'll have to go now. Will you

stay put this time, or must I lock you up?"

Dave had been pushed around too long. "On what charge? You can't lock me up without a reason. Do you have one?"

Morgan ticked off several. "Material witness, suspicion of murder, assault with a deadly weapon. How about—?"

"Never mind. You win," Dave told him. "I'll stay put."

There were people on the beach but Tommy saw them only as mobile obstacles between which he must make his way. He went north, plodding through soft sand toward questionable refuge. Fear prodded him so sharply that once he lost his head and broke into a run.

But he got hold of himself almost immediately, and slowed to an inconspicuous walk. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? He was a cop; he knew that a cop's attention is always attracted by a running man. Particularly when the man doesn't seem to be running anywhere. The cop instinctively looks to see who's chasing him.

There wasn't anybody chasing him, that he knew of. He had a good head start. He'd got out of the window and down the ladder a split-second after the first knock on the door. He had gone so fast that he'd been halfway down

when he'd heard the shouted, "Open up—police!" He had not heard Dexter's answering shout.

Why hadn't he heard it? He hadn't hit the old man often or very hard. He'd pulled his punches, or meant to pull them, because he didn't really give a damn about Dexter one way or the other. All he'd wanted was to throw a scare into the guy. Scare him enough so he wouldn't blab the little that he knew.

But when you came right down to it, what did Dexter know that was worth blabbing? He might be able to say that Tommy was tall and dark, and had been wearing a sports shirt, but they could walk along the beach and drag up a thousand guys that looked like that. Fingerprints? Prints must be so thick in Dexter's greasy shack, the chances were a hundred to one against them finding a single positive.

So he was safe, or reasonably so, and all he had to do was get out of the neighborhood, act natural and fix up those two alibis. Just the same, he wished Dexter had sung out when that knock came on the door. The old guy had either been too scared to answer, or—

Tommy refused to consider the alternative. His head was still splitting and Palisades City was a half-mile behind him now. He wanted a drink. But all they sold at the makeshift stands along the beach

was beer. The bars were on the far side of the boardwalk, and he didn't want to go up on the boardwalk yet. He stopped at a stand and bought a can of beer.

It tasted like carbonated quinine water, but he got it down. He came to the crowded pier at last, and had a double shot of bourbon at a bar. The whiskey warmed him, cleared his thinking. He knew exactly what he had to do.

There was a liquor store across from the end of the pier. He bought a pint of bourbon, put it in his pocket, went to the corner and caught a southbound bus. The bus line paralleled the boardwalk. He got off a block east of Dexter's place, walked to the parking lot and got his car. Then he drove inland, approaching Martinez Canyon by a roundabout route. He parked behind Mildred's cafe, drank from his bottle and got out of the car. He opened the kitchen door of the cafe, but did not enter.

"Mildred—" He kept his voice low as he called.

She was in the kitchen, as he'd figured she would be; it wasn't time for the lunch crowd yet. She looked at him with sullen resentment from the far side of the stove.

"Come back to hit me again, Tom? Didn't you do it hard enough last time?"

"Honest to God, Mildred, I wouldn't hurt you for the world. Wouldn't have touched you if you hadn't gone haywire on me. What

you said—about me and Ralph, remember—it just wasn't true."

"Why did you come back?"

"There's a little something you can do for me. No trouble, honey, or I wouldn't ask you. Just give Earl a message."

"Earl?"

"Earl Bingham. He's probably parked across the road. Will you do that for me?"

"Why don't you do it for yourself?"

"There's a reason, a good reason. Just get Earl off by himself and tell him I want to see him. I'll be in Manny's joint next door."

"Suppose he isn't there?"

"Tell him when he comes. I'll wait. And Mildred, anybody asks you, I been in and out all morning. I want to talk to you, too, as soon as I've seen Earl. See you later," he said, forcing a hard quality into his voice. "Let me give you some advice—don't cross me up."

Mildred said quietly, "The way you're acting, something tells me you're crossed up already. Can't say it breaks my heart."

"I could break your heart, if that was what I wanted. I hope you won't make me," Tommy said.

He left her, slipping around the corner of the cafe and into Manny's. He bought a can of beer and carried it to an empty booth. There was a window on his left. A thick curtain was drawn across it. He parted the curtain and looked out.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to bright sunlight after the gloomy interior of the bar. When they did, he saw Earl in the prowler car across the road. Earl was alone. Mildred stood beside the road waiting for a break in the traffic that would enable her to cross. The break came, but the prowler car moved away before it did. It merged with southbound traffic, headed toward the breakwater and the pier.

Never mind. Earl would come back, although that landslide might slow him down a little, and if Mildred knew what was good for her she would be waiting for him when he did. Tommy dropped the curtain, and immediately parted it again.

The scene was unchanged, but now he was able to identify a couple of people he had only glanced at casually before. The ice cream wagon was parked in front of Mildred's place. A man was standing beside it talking earnestly to the driver. Dave Russell!

Tommy slapped the curtain back in place. He took the bottle from his hip pocket, helped himself to a slug and chased it down with beer. He put the bottle back, and for a time did absolutely nothing. He didn't even think.

He knew that something was wrong at least a quarter of a minute before he was able to put his finger on exactly what it was. The knowledge felt, at first, like an

emptiness in his stomach. Then, with realization sudden and complete, he stiffened as though he had been given a severe electric shock. The breath went out of him. He clapped his hand to his right hip pocket. Nothing was in it but the pint of whiskey. The left pocket contained only a handkerchief.

His blackjack was gone.

"But I heard you!" Dave insisted. "Early Sunday morning. You drove past my house."

Ken Hurley answered impatiently. "You couldn't have heard me. I'm always in bed by thirty. That's my rule."

"Then someone was driving your truck. I recognized that little tune it plays."

Hurley shook his head. "Every evening all trucks get turned in to the company garage. The garage is locked. There's a watchman in the place all night."

"But—?"

"Say, tell me something, will you? What's everybody picking on me for, anyway? Lieutenant Morgan gave me the same line. I told him just what I've told you." After a moment, he added coldly, "Sometimes, or so they tell me, people hear things that just aren't there. Particularly when they're under a strain."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Dave said, and turned away. Abruptly, he

turned back. "Hey, wait a minute. You told Morgan a lot more than that. You alibied Lu Warren, said you saw him on the road. How could you have seen him if you were in bed?"

Hurley's shrug expressed disgusted resignation. "Okay, okay—Morgan knows, so I might as well broadcast it to the world. Saturday night the wife and I had a small difference of opinion. She threw a book at me and ran out of the house. I met Warren when I went out to see which way she was heading. When she came home around two, I saw him again. Asked him what he was doing. He said he was looking for his cousin. Satisfied?"

"If the police are, I suppose I'll have to be. I'm also satisfied," Dave said, "that I heard an ice cream truck, but you've convinced me that it wasn't yours." He went home, not nearly as convinced as he had said he was.

Helen came down from the kitchen. "Find out anything?"

"I drew a blank." He told her Hurley's revised story.

She said thoughtfully, "That's not necessarily a blank. He's a big part of Warren's alibi. If he and Lu turned out to be friends, or if—"

"Please, darling," he begged, "we can't go around suspecting everybody. Let it rest."

She sighed. "I really botched things, didn't I?"

"Botched things—you?"

"This whole thing started because of my darned jealousy. If I hadn't nagged you so, you would have stayed home Saturday. You would never have been dragged into this. It's all my fault."

Dave was astonished. "Careful, girl—humility's rich food."

"I can swallow it. It's taken something like this horrible murder to make me see the truth. Darling, you know those long strings of colored electric lights they hang on Christmas trees? I'm like they are."

"You're prettier."

"No, I'm trying to be serious," she said. "The tree's all lit up, everything is lovely. Then one tiny light flickers—and the connection's broken. The whole string goes out. That's me. We're getting along fine. Then some small thing happens, and it may not even be your fault. But suddenly there's no more light and you're the world's worst heel. How can two people who love each other, as we do, act like that?"

"I don't know," he said, "but I do know one thing. We're not going to do it any more." He put his hand out, and she took it solemnly. "Agreed?"

"It's a deal," she said.

They had a light lunch. Afterwards, Helen refused to let him help her with the dishes. The telephone rang as she started carrying them to the kitchen. She put the dishes down to answer it.

"Yes? Oh, hello, Mr. Victor. No, I was standing right here by the phone." She was silent for what seemed to Dave a long time. Occasionally she frowned. "I understand," she said at last. "You'd better wire them. Hammerschlag & Vincent; my address book's on the desk." Her frown was deeper this time, really troubled. "Oh, Lord! Will you hold the line a minute, please?"

She cupped her right hand over the instrument. "I've goofed," she whispered. "Darling, would you mind terribly if I ran into the shop just for an hour or two?"

"Go right ahead." He waved permission with a lightness that he did not feel.

Helen spoke into the phone again. She told Victor to hold everything, that he could expect her at the shop within an hour. But as she talked, her eyes were fixed questioningly on Dave. He turned away, looked out the window. He was no longer listening but he knew when she hung up. He knew what she was going to say before she spoke.

"Dave, the way you looked just now—are you *sure* that you don't mind?"

He turned back after a moment, smiling. "Mind? Of course, I mind. You're not the only one whose wiring is a little faulty. But run along, darling. My lights may have flickered for a second, but now they're screwed in tight."

"Okay." She was responding slowly to his smile. "I'll leave as soon as I've done the dishes."

"You'll leave now. I'll do the dishes, and have a good time doing them," he said.

Tommy heard someone speak his name. He opened his eyes. Mildred was standing beside the table. He shook his head in an effort to clear it, and felt for his bottle. It was empty. Someone had stolen his liquor while he slept.

"You take my liquor?" he asked Mildred.

"No. And after you've heard what I've got to tell you, you better lay off the bottle. I talked to Earl Bingham."

Earl. The necessity of seeing him, and all the pressing reasons that made it a necessity, swept over Tommy in a nauseating wave. "Where is he?"

"He can't come here. Not until much later, after work. He says they found your blackjack. There's an all-points out to pick you up."

"Oh, my God!" Tommy struggled to rise, but couldn't make it. He fell back heavily against the booth. "Why would they do a thing like that to me? I'm a cop, just like they are. They're my friends!"

"You don't have friends, Tom, unless maybe Earl is one. Outside of him, all you've got is a lot of people that you've used."

Mildred left him. She went back to the cafe, and did not permit herself to think of him again. That wasn't hard; she was utterly pre-occupied by something more important. This was Monday. In a few more hours, with the coming of darkness, her son planned to escape. If it took all night, she would wait beside the telephone to hear from Ralph.

At half-past six Dave crossed the road to the super-market and bought a can of roast beef hash for dinner. He bought canned stuff because it would be easier to prepare, and he chose the smaller size because Helen had just telephoned that she and Victor were still trying to straighten things out at the shop. Something about an order from Hammerschlag & Vincent that had been shipped to the wrong address. She would have dinner in town and come home afterwards as soon as she could get away.

Dave had accepted it serenely. Only a few hours before, he realized, the message would have left him wallowing in resentment. Now he could take it, not only without wincing, but without feeling that his masculine pride demanded at least a token wince. He left the market with a small bag of groceries, shouldering the glass doors open wide.

"Evening, Mr. Russell," a man said.

The man was getting out of a parked car. Dave recognized him as one of the deputies he had ridden with last night. The fairly decent deputy, as opposed to the one who had clouted him behind the ear. A huge man in uniform, he seemed even bigger in civilian trousers and white shirt.

"Hello, Bingham. Thanks for holding your partner back last night."

The deputy looked sheepish. "Tommy wouldn't of really hurt you. He's a nice fellow, just sort of . . . exciteable."

"He's that, all right. You know why I haven't filed a complaint against him? I hope to be clear of this mess soon," Dave said. "Then I'm going to find him off duty and out of uniform. I'm going to take him apart. You tell him that."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Russell, but he ain't going to like it," Bingham said.

Trying to pound something into Earl's thick muttonhead was like slapping water with a stick. He just sat there on the other side of the table, meaning well, but nothing you said to him left much impression. Tommy sighed, went over it again.

"Look, Earl, maybe you better write this down and study it. Friday night I was with Mildred. I haven't talked to her yet, but I know she'll back me up. Saturday

night—well, where was I then?"

A frown formed slowly on Earl's narrow forehead. "I know what you want me to say. You want me to say you was with me."

"That's it! I knew you'd get it, given time. We bought a six-pack of beer and drank it on the beach. That's where I lost my blackjack. Then we drove up to Santa Barbara just for the ride. At three A.M. you drove me back to my place and spent the night. Got it?"

Earl nodded, and Tommy gave him a relieved smile. He killed the rest of a can of beer. "Wish I had a decent drink."

Earl pulled two full pints of bourbon from his pockets. He pushed them across the table. "Mildred told me you was drinking. Figured you'd be needing a pick-up about now."

"If you wasn't so ugly, Earl, I'd kiss you." Tommy stowed away one pint, opened the other and tilted it against his lips. "Well, now we got everything settled, haven't we?" He drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

Earl shook his head. "It won't work. Morgan's already asked me about both nights. Told him I went to a picture show Friday, and then went home. Did the same thing Saturday; it was a real good show. Asked me if I'd seen you. I told him no."

Tommy didn't move. Only his sick eyes betrayed the way he felt. All his plans, and all the hopes

founded on those plans, had suddenly been smashed. Mildred might have alibied him for one night, but not for both. Hazel would have known that she was lying. She wouldn't have let Mildred get away with it. She hated Tommy for some reason he had never been able to understand.

Earl was still talking, but his voice was only a semi-intelligible rumble in Tommy's ears. "I'd do anything to help you, if I could. If I'd known what you wanted me to tell Morgan, I'd of told him exactly what you said. I'm sure sorry."

"You're sorry."

Earl nodded. "You're my friend. Everybody knows that. Why, Morgan put a tail on me hoping I'd lead him to you. It's okay," he raised a reassuring hand. "I shook him. But I'm taking a chance just being seen with you. That's all right, too. Us cops got to stick together. I want to help you all I can."

"How?"

"You better hole in somewheres. This'll all blow over." Earl paused, and after a moment added, "It'll blow over, that is, if you didn't really kill that girl."

"Hey!" Tommy sat up straight. "What is this? You know damn well I didn't kill her!"

Earl soothed him down. "Sure, Tommy, sure. I know you didn't, and I got a pretty good idea who did."

"So have I. Russell."

"Well, maybe—maybe not. Maybe it's another fellow doesn't live so far from here. People don't know, but he's been having trouble with his wife. Had his eye on Thelma. Anyway," Earl said, "you better keep away from Russell. Next time he sees you, he says he's going to take you apart."

Tommy leaned forward, his elbows heavy on the table. "Did he actually say that?"

"Sure did. Not ten minutes ago, out here in front. Hold on, Tommy." Earl rose, gently restrained his friend. "You can't tangle with him now. Where's your car?"

"Back of Mildred's. Why?"

"You better stretch out in it and get a little sleep. Then find yourself a place to hide."

"Just like that, huh? Where?"

Earl said thoughtfully, "You got a private entrance to your room. They already went there to look for you. If you was to leave your car somewhere, your own place might be the safest place there is."

There was a short silence. "I'll think about it," Tommy said.

"You do that." Earl asked one more question just before he left. "Say, Tommy—tell me the truth. Where was you Saturday night?"

Tommy stared at him furiously. "It's sapping Dexter they want me for. That's all. I had nothing to do with that blonde girl. I didn't even know her, understand? You remember that, and keep your nose out of places where it don't belong."

"Sure, Tommy — anything you say." The big deputy left the table, walked out of the beer joint. Tommy was alone. He thought about the girl he'd had a date with Saturday night. There was a fat chance of getting Maria Gonzalez to give him an alibi. If Corporal Gonzalez knew the truth, he'd beat hell out of his wife. And if he didn't do the same to Tommy, he'd certainly have Tommy's job. It was a terrible thing to be suspected of something that you haven't done, and not be able to prove you haven't done it because what you *had* done was, from certain prejudiced points of view, almost as bad.

Tommy pushed Maria from his mind and concentrated on the guy who'd really killed poor Thelma. He was going to have to have a showdown with Dave Russell, beat the truth out of him if it was necessary. But Earl had been right about one thing. Before he tackled Russell, before he did anything, he was going to have to get a little sleep.

At ten minutes past seven the pay telephone in the front part of the cafe rang shrilly. There was only one customer at the counter. Mildred went over to the phone. Her movements were unhurried. She had been waiting hours for this moment, and she had schooled herself not to betray excitement. Her hand was steady as she lifted the receiver and held it to her ear.

"Hello," she said, expecting to hear Ralph's voice.

A woman answered. "This is Western Union. I have a telegram for Mrs. Mildred Riggs."

"This is Mrs. Riggs. Read it to me," Mildred said.

There was a pause. Then the woman said slowly and with terrible distinctness, "Message follows. 'Regret to inform you Ralph accidentally killed while attempting escape. Please wire as to disposition of body.'" A shorter pause. "The telegram is signed—"

"Never mind," Mildred said. "I know who signed it."

"Would you like us to mail you a copy?"

"I don't care. It makes no difference."

She hung up. The customer was drinking coffee. "Leave your money on the counter," she told him. "Shut the door when you go out." She went into the kitchen and sat down beside the window, her accustomed place.

She was sitting there when Tom Riggs came out of the beer joint. She saw him stand unsteadily for a moment, staring at the house across the road. Then he lurched around to the rear of the cafe. Presently she heard him climb into his car. He slammed the door but did not drive away.

An indeterminable period of time went by. It could have been three minutes or three hours. Mildred didn't know. She was waiting for

something—something significant—to happen. She did not know what it would be, but she knew that it would happen, and that she would recognize it and be guided by it when it did.

Then Tom Riggs snored, and apparently was awakened by his snoring. The car door creaked as he opened it and got out.

Dave went up to the bedroom, and changed to pajamas and a dressing gown. It was a gesture supposed to show that he wasn't a bit worried. But he was worried. It was ten o'clock and Helen had not yet come home.

The doorbell rang. He was running down the stairs before he realized that it could not be Helen who had rung it; she would have used her key. That only increased his anxiety. She might have been in an accident. This might be someone bringing him the news. His hand was damp, turning the knob.

The door was violently pushed open. The deputy named Riggs stood there. He was no longer handsome. His face was lined and puffy, his half-closed eyes were red. He looked as though he had been drunk, and shortly might be drunk again, but right now he was sober. Fairly sober. He took two lumbering steps into the room.

"Smart boy, Russell! Murder Thelma, then make 'em think I did it!" He swung a powerful but misdirected fist.

Dave hit him twice. The first blow caught him in the belly and won a spray of vomited bourbon. The second, as Riggs doubled up, came from below to connect with the point of the deputy's chin. He went down but, falling, he wrapped his arms around Dave's legs.

They were strong arms. Dave tried to smash his knee into Rigg's face, but the dragging weight threw him off balance. He fell, but managed to free himself. Once more he slammed his fist against the sagging chin. He sat on top of Riggs and banged his head against the floor. Suddenly all resistance stopped. The man's head lolled to one side. He had passed out cold.

Dave slapped him, first on one cheek then the other. There was no response. He got up, went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Returning, he poured it on the upturned face. Riggs gasped. His eyes came into bleary focus. He stared at Dave.

Dave nudged him with his foot. "So now they think you did it, do they? Well, that figures. A cop was at Dexter's Friday night with Thelma. You're a cop. Suppose you tell me all about it, friend."

Comprehension came back slowly to the staring eyes. "Gimme a drink."

Dave grinned. "What would you like? Water, whiskey, gin?"

"Whiskey."

"There's a whole fifth in the liquor cabinet. But you'll have to

earn it. Want to talk?"

"Got nothing to lose. Gimme a drink," Riggs said. "I'll talk."

Dave crossed to the cabinet. He filled a shot glass, and brought back both the glass and bottle. Riggs gulped the whiskey. He got groggily to his feet, held out the empty glass. Dave refilled it. Riggs threw the second glass of whiskey in Dave's face.

Alcohol seared his eyes. Through a burning haze, he saw the deputy stagger toward the door. Half-blind, he plunged after him. He almost caught him on the outside stairs, but Riggs kicked backward. His heel hit Dave in the chest. Dave saved himself by grabbing at the banister, but the delay had given Riggs too big a start. He had already crossed the road when Dave got up to the gate. Riggs was running in the general direction of Mildred's cafe, and Dave started after him. He stopped when he heard his name called softly.

"Mr. Russell?"

It was man's voice. Dave thought he recognized it. It came from the shadows on the far side of the gate.

"Let him go, Mr. Russell. They'll pick him up now. Poor fellow hasn't got a chance."

"Bingham?"

"Yes, sir. Hope Tommy didn't hurt you. I tried to get here sooner. Had trouble with my car."

Dave's eyes had adjusted to the night, and they no longer burned. He could see Bingham quite dis-

tinctly now. The deputy stood beside an old sedan. It was a black Buick with a damaged right rear fender. There was something about its presence here, and about Bingham's presence, that didn't fit in logically with the time and place.

"Why didn't you warn me Riggs was coming? You didn't have to drive; you could have phoned."

"Didn't have anything for sure to tell you. I didn't know what Tommy was going to do. He was in bad enough trouble. Didn't want to make it worse."

"He's in trouble, all right," Dave said. "And so are you. You're a deputy sheriff. Riggs is wanted for murder. Why didn't you grab him? You practically had him in your hands."

The huge deputy was silent. He produced a pack of cigarettes, methodically opened it. He offered a cigarette to Dave.

Dave shook his head impatiently. "Well?"

"Just couldn't do it, Mr. Russell," Bingham told him. "Deep down inside me, I still can't believe that Tommy killed that girl. Sure, I *know* he did it, but knowing ain't believing. Anyway, I can't arrest him. He's my friend."

There was another silence, longer than the one that had preceded it. Then Dave said, "He's no friend of mine. I'll have to telephone Lieutenant Morgan, Bingham. I'm going to do it now."

Bingham shrugged. "I see what

you mean. It all depends on how you look at it. I won't try to stop you. Guess it's the only thing you can do."

Dave turned away, feeling no sense of vindication or of triumph. Feeling, on the contrary, unsatisfied. Something was lacking, but what it was he didn't know. He would do what he had to do. From then on it would be up to the police. He started toward the little gate.

Then he stopped, becoming suddenly and absolutely rigid. From close at hand—from very close at hand—there came a tinkling little tune. Dave had an instant of total recall. It was two o'clock in the morning and he was standing in the kitchen, in the dark. Outside, beyond the kitchen window, a man had just climbed into a car. Its motor started and Dave distinctly heard familiar notes. They formed the refrain he had always associated with the ice cream wagon. *Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?*

Dave turned back slowly. He looked at the deputy, at the cigarette lighter in Bingham's hand. That's where the tune was coming from, the lighter. It was one of those Swiss gadgets that played when its top was open. In the excitement of discovery, Dave stared at it too long.

He looked up to see that Bingham was watching him, and he saw that Bingham knew he'd been found out. Neither man spoke.

After a moment, Dave turned away again.

This time he hurried. When he heard footsteps close behind him, he broke into a run. He ran down the steps and slammed the front door as he went in. He crossed to the telephone. He had just picked it up when the door shuddered under the impact of Bingham's heavy shoulder. He dialed rapidly.

The door burst open. There was a gun in Bingham's hand as he came in. The gun was pointed at Dave's stomach.

"Put the phone down, Mr. Russell," Bingham said.

Dave dropped it in its cradle. When Bingham told him to turn around, that's what he did. Something heavy crashed down on his head. He heard a groan, and vaguely recognized the sound of his own voice. Then the room tilted up on end and slid away.

Helen turned into the beach road from the canyon at twenty-eight past ten. There was a light still burning in Mildred's cafe as she passed. That was unusual, but Helen was so angry that she didn't even notice. She was furious with Victor for keeping her so late. Goodness only knew what Dave would say when she got home.

A car was parked just beyond the little gate, and she slowed down to stop behind it. Her headlights il-

luminated the crumpled fender of a black Buick sedan. The Buick moved out as her car crept up on it; it made a fast U-turn and headed north. The Rambler slid into the place where it had been. Helen climbed out and started down the steps, coming to an abrupt stop as she neared the door.

The door stood open, and something was the matter with it. Light streamed through the doorway from the living room. She went down the rest of the way and saw that the door was hanging awry on its hinges. She walked past it, looked up the stairs toward the kitchen. No sound came from the kitchen; it was dark.

"Dave—?" She ran up the stairs.

The bed was unrumpled. His shirt and slacks were lying in a chair. She looked in the closet. His pajamas and dressing gown were gone. Where, dressed only in a dressing gown and pajamas, could Dave have gone at this hour of the night? And who had broken in the door?

She remembered the black Buick with the crumpled fender. Panic clogged her throat.

She ran down to the telephone. She told the operator to connect her with the sheriff's sub-station, that it was an emergency.

A red-hot spike had been driven through Dave's skull. He was burning up but his forehead, curiously,

was cold. And wet. There was a rumbling nearby crash of heavy surf. He opened his eyes and, by the gritty feel of it, knew that he was lying face downward on damp sand. His hands were locked behind his back. He moved them, but only for a couple of inches. They stopped then, the metal was tight around his wrists.

He rolled over on his back, willing the pain to go away. It didn't go, but presently it became supportable. A man stood near him, thick legs spread apart. It was Earl Bingham.

The deputy must have heard him move, but he paid no attention. He was staring northward, up the coast. Dave knew where he was now, on the beach near Point of Rocks, beside one of the pools left by the receding tide. One of the pools in which Bingham had drowned Thelma. By turning his head and craning back his neck, he was able to see what the deputy was staring at. There were red flares on the road ahead.

"What is it, Bingham?" he asked. "Your first glimpse of hell?"

The deputy looked down at him. "Trouble of some kind. Don't know what. Sorry you woke up, Russell. Hoped I could get this over with before you did."

"Must you get it over with?"

Bingham's voice, when he answered, was puzzled and surprised. "Well, sure. What else can I do?"

"I don't know what you hope to

gain. They're sure to catch you. I don't know why you killed Thelma. Tell me, Bingham—why?"

"I am not as slow-thinking as everybody says I am. Fellow gets tired of always being pushed aside, seeing other fellows get the gravy, the good-looking girls. There was something special about Thelma. She was beauty-full. Tommy didn't see that; all he saw was another dame, and he treated her like one. He didn't have no trouble. So I tried, but she just laughed at me. Made me pretty mad. Guess I sort of lost my head."

"What makes you think she didn't laugh at Tommy, too?"

"Because he told me. He told me she was easy. Tommy wouldn't lie to mé. He's my friend."

Dave looked past the deputy at the zebra-shadows on the beach. He had thought he'd seen one move, but now it was quite still. He kept on talking, and tried to keep Bingham talking. Kill time. Hope that something, anything, would happen. It was the only thing left.

"Riggs is your friend, but you went out of your way to make him look bad. You wanted him to be suspected. Why?"

Bingham chuckled. The muscular spasm accompanying the chuckle was like a small earthquake. "Sure played that one smart. Yes, sir—Tommy might of pulled that trick hisself."

"How smart can you get? Would

you have let him go to the gas chamber in your place?"

The earthquake chuckle gradually subsided. "Why not?" Bingham said. "I don't want to die, and it's what Tommy would of done to me. He's told me so a hundred times. He always said a guy's got to look out for hisself."

He reached down then to put his hands beneath Dave's arms, to drag him over to the pool. For an instant he was in a vulnerable position. Dave drove his right foot up with all his strength.

Bingham's breath whoosed out of him. His hands went to his crotch; he doubled over. Dave tried to get his legs out of the way. Too late. The deputy landed on them as he fell.

His huge arms encircled them and held on tight. Presently, when his breathing had grown normal, he got back on his feet. This time when he approached, it was cautiously, from Dave's head. The shallow pool was less than a yard away. One heave pulled Dave up beside it. A big hand grabbed his head and pushed it down. Dave tried to shout, and gagged on brackish water. He breathed, and water rushed into his lungs. He had not known there could be red flares beneath the surface of the water. But they were there, lots of them, when they should have been up on the road. He watched them, growing strangely incurious as time passed.

One by one the red flares all went out.

The mindless night was alive, groping and sentient. It seeped through the kitchen window, dimming the single electric bulb suspended from the ceiling. Mildred knew that when the light was gone, when the darkness was complete, she would go, too. Not bravely, not with a gallant gesture. The night would simply take her over. She would cease to be.

Someone opened the front door of the cafe. "Anybody here?" a man's voice called. She got up slowly, went to the service panel remembering that she had not locked the door.

"Sorry. Closed for the night." She looked through the service panel at the man who had come in.

He was dressed in working clothes: high laced boots and a yellow metal helmet. The helmet was shaped like those worn in the First World War. He turned in the direction of her voice.

"Have to use your phone." He had already started toward it, feeling in his pocket for a coin.

Mildred pulled her head back from the panel, heard him dial, heard the bell ring as he dropped his dime. "Put Mike Collins on. Emergency," he said.

Five seconds passed while his fingers impatiently tapped the coin box. Then he spoke urgently. "This

is Art. Mike, you know that fault a half-mile north of Point of Rocks? It gave way twenty minutes ago." A pause. "The biggest yet. Knocked out the whole road—nothing left but a sheer drop to the rocks. Better get the gang here on the double."

He listened, nodded briskly. "Yeah, set up a road block—route traffic through Martinez Canyon. Will do. I already got flares going. Hurry up."

He hung up, started for the door. Mildred came into the front part of the cafe.

"What happened?"

"Landslide," the man said. He hurried out.

Mildred returned to the kitchen. She took a switchblade from the pocket of her apron, and dropped it on a table. The knife was part of her defiant, bitter past; she wouldn't need it any more. She took her apron off and hung it on a nail. She picked up a bright scarf from the table and tied the scarf around her head. There was something almost coquettish about the manner in which she adjusted it and tied the knot. She smiled at her reflection in a mirror. She might have been a young girl going to a dance.

She didn't bother to shut the kitchen door as she went out. She walked around the parked car, opened the door, got in behind the wheel. Tommy was huddled in the corner of the front seat, head drooping on his chest. He didn't

awaken until she had started the car, backed up and turned into the beach road.

He stirred then. His head came up, but it was at least a minute before he spoke. "Well, what do you know! Old Mildred," he said thickly. "You taking me for a ride?"

"That's right."

"Cops looking for me, Milly. Where we going?"

"We're going home," she said.

A man shouted at them as the car sped north. He wore a yellow helmet, and Mildred swerved to avoid hitting him. A few yards south of Point of Rocks three cars were clustered together off the road. Two of them bore the official insignia of California, but Mildred didn't notice that. She was staring eagerly through the windshield at red brilliance on the curving road ahead. The brilliance came from flares. Black moving dots were silhouetted against them. The moving dots grew larger, became distinguishable as men. One of the men threw up his arms in an arresting gesture. He shouted; there was a whole chorus of warning shouts. Mildred ignored them. Her eyes were fixed on a wide gap in the road ahead.

Beyond the gap was nothingness. The flares were on both side of the brink. Their redness had a stimulating effect on Tommy. He started bragging about his twenty-one inch color television as the car

shot into space.

It was a hot day. The window by Dave's bed was open.

A young man stood by the window studying a chart. He wore a stethoscope around his neck. When he saw Dave looking at him questioningly, he smiled.

"Awake, Mr. Russell?"

"What hospital is this?"

"St. Mark's. It's eight o'clock in the morning. Your temperature is normal, and if you don't let yourself get excited you'll probably be discharged this afternoon."

"How did I get here?"

"The usual way, an ambulance. Don't talk too much, Mr. Russell; I'll tell you anything you want to know. You can thank your wife for being here. She telephoned Lieutenant Morgan, described Bingham's car. They'd been looking for it already. Morgan showed up at Point of Rocks in time to pull your head out of the water; the ambulance crew got the water out of your lungs. Bingham's in jail. He's a celebrity. His picture's in all the papers, and he's making the most of it. That's all, I think," the doctor said. "Or is there something more?"

Through the window came familiar notes, a tinkling little tune. It passed. Dave listened until it had faded in the distance. It was a hot day, but it wasn't ice cream that he wanted.

"Where's my wife?"



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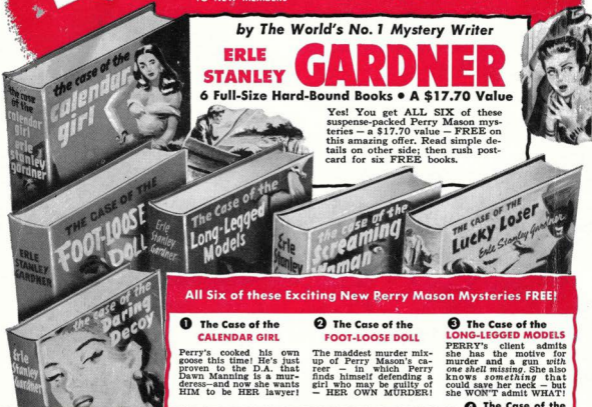
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